

Guardian
backing

Friday February 27 1998

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This section, page 12

Brown to pour billions into child care

Massive switch of cash to poor

Polly Toynbee

THE scale and ambition of the Chancellor's child care plans became clear yesterday when it emerged that the Government could commit billions of pounds a year to redistribution of wealth in favour of the poor.

The scope of the initiative astonished many of those who have campaigned for years for state child care subsidies. Gordon Brown will announce in the Budget a payout of 75 per cent of child care costs for low-income families, defined as those on under £20,000 a year. The Government will accept child care costs up to £100 a week for a first child, with the state

paying out £75 and families picking up the remaining £25. For two children, the state will pay 75 per cent of £130 — £97.50. This will be paid as a tax allowance to higher earners, and for those below the tax threshold it will come as a cash supplement to their new Working Families Tax Credit. Child care campaigners were not expecting anything like these sums. The National Private Day Nurseries Association said yesterday that it reckoned even a £30 subsidy would make a real difference to the number of women who could afford to go out to work and pay for child care. Kids Club Network was delighted, as low-income families could

not afford to pay more than £25-£30 a week. "This will make child care affordable for all families," the Daycare Trust, the umbrella group for child care organisations, welcomed it as "both generous and well-targeted". To qualify for the child care credit, parents will have to show receipts from registered child minders, nurseries or after-school clubs. This is not only to ensure the safety of the children but to avoid fraud, where neighbours might claim to take in one another's children.

The Government estimates that the new child care credit will cost £1 billion in the first year. That is the cost of sub-

siding all those families earning under £20,000 who currently use registered child care. But the real costs will rise sharply if the credit does what is intended, and helps millions more mothers back to work. However, it will take several years for enough nurseries, after-school clubs and child minders to be trained and registered to take up the full demand.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), which yesterday calculated the figures for the Guardian, said: "This is a massive redistribution towards the poor." There are 6.6 million families with children on incomes under £20,000. If eventually all these families use

registered child care and take up the maximum subsidy in the new credit, it could cost as much as £10 billion. But the sum is likely to be less, as the child care credit will taper off towards the £20,000 cut-off point. Also, the subsidy will save money from the social security budget as it helps large numbers of women off welfare and into work.

The extra billions to pay for all this will come from tax receipts now flowing into the Treasury as the economy expands, some of which will be released when current government spending limits end in April 1999.

There was praise for Mr Brown's plans from child care

and poverty campaigners. As well as the child care credit there will be other extra cash for low-income families both in and out of work. Some MPs who rebelled against cuts in lone-parent benefits said that had they known the Chancellor's intentions, they would not have voted against the Government.

Harriet Harman, Social Security Secretary, and Tony Blair were at pains yesterday to point out that this is not a U-turn. It is in no way reversing the lone-parent cuts, but offers an entirely new direction for tackling poverty and making work pay.

Deal for women, page 7



Alert over child jabs

Sarah Bosoley
Health correspondent

A MEDICAL study suggests today that there could be a link between the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine (MMR) given to children in their second year of life and inflammatory bowel disease and autism.

Dr Andrew Wakefield and colleagues at the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead, London, report in the *Lancet* that children referred to them with signs of autism and gut problems had a hitherto unknown bowel syndrome and that treating it alleviated some of autism symptoms.

They also found that the behavioural changes in the children which are typical of autism, such as forgetting the basic language they had just learned, began within days of their MMR vaccination.

The government's Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr Jeremy Metters, said there was no reason to change the advice to parents. "We have kept closely in touch with the work going on at the Royal Free," he said. "It is not the first time concerns about the MMR vaccine have been raised, but two advisory groups, the Joint Committee on Vaccinations and Immunisation and the Committee on the Safety of Medicines have been keeping this work under close review and neither has advised any change to the childhood vaccination programme."

"Our advice to parents is to continue to vaccinate your children because there is no evidence that the MMR vaccine carries the risk suggested. The risk of not using this vaccine far outweighs any possible known side-effects."

At the Royal Free, doctors were divided over the implications. Most backed the Department of Health in urging parents to go ahead with the MMR jab. But Dr Wakefield

believes the three vaccines should be separated and given a year apart, so that young children's immune systems should not be put under pressure by three live virus strains at the same time.

"We put children at no greater risk if we dissociate the vaccines," said Dr Wakefield. The combination jab had not been properly tested before its introduction, he felt. "The vaccine policy in this country depends on trust... I fear there may in the future be a breach of this trust and that may adversely affect vaccination policy," he said.

He and the team hoped the Government would call an independent review of all the evidence concerning MMR under the auspices of the Medical Research Council.

The *Lancet* paper focuses on 12 children who were referred to the Royal Free following reports of the team's previous work, which linked MMR to Crohn's disease — a chronic inflammation of the bowel. All had developed normally in their first year but had lost acquired skills such as language in their second year and were suffering from gut problems such as severe constipation or diarrhoea.

All the children were found to have an inflammatory bowel syndrome which the team had never encountered before. Nine were diagnosed as autistic and in eight cases the parents or the CP noticed the behavioural changes within six days on average of the MMR. Autism tends to develop in the second year of life, but researchers in the United States have also noticed that the onset of symptoms closely followed the MMR, said Dr Wakefield.

Since the study was submitted to the *Lancet*, the team has seen a further 40 children and all but one had the same combination of intestinal and behavioural problems. Dr Wakefield said they now had some 700 children waiting to see them.



Oprah Winfrey celebrates yesterday's ruling that her show had not defamed the beef industry

PHOTOGRAPH: L. M. OTERO

Oprah jurors reject ranchers' beef

Martin Kettle in Washington

OPRAH Winfrey, America's television talk show queen, left a Texas court in triumph yesterday after a jury threw out the only remaining count in the beef libel suit brought against her by Texan cattlemen.

Amid rumours that her lawyers had earlier agreed to settle out of court with a payment of \$2.4 million (£1.5 million) to a group of cattlemen, Ms Winfrey returned home to Chicago last night owing nothing at the end of a six-week trial that has gripped America.

Punching the air, Ms Winfrey told a cheering crowd outside the court in Amarillo: "Free speech not only lives, it rocks."

The cattlemen had sued for damages after a vegetarian activist said on Ms Winfrey's show in 1996 that mad cow disease could spread as quickly through the United States as it did in Britain and agreed that the consequences "could make AIDS look like the common cold".

Ms Winfrey then told the studio audience: "It has just stopped me cold from eating another burger." The cattlemen claimed that her remarks caused the

beef market to crash, losing them millions of dollars. Ms Winfrey gave the cattlemen a second helping yesterday, telling reporters: "I'm still off hamburgers."

Last week the judge, Mary Lou Robinson, threw out two suits brought under Texas's product disparagement legislation, the "veggie libel" law intended to stifle public criticism of the food industry, particularly meat products.

The cattlemen claimed they had "vindicated" their defence of American beef and said they would appeal. "The US beef supply is safe," said Paul Engler, the lead plaintiff.

Asked whether he thought the jury had been influenced by Ms Winfrey's fame, the cattlemen's lawyer, Joe Coyne, said: "You'd have to be blind to think they weren't influenced by one of the 25 most influential Americans."

Ms Winfrey said the verdict was a victory not just for her and not just for free speech but for Afro-American civil rights and even for God. "I come from a people who have struggled and died in order to have a voice in this country, and I refuse to be muzzled," she said. Later, she agreed with a supporter that "the Lord was on my shoulder".

CJD fears force blood product ban

Tim Fladford
Science Editor

MORE than 80 treatments made from British blood and needed by up to 350,000 people each year are to be withdrawn because they might spread the new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (nvCJD), health officials warned yesterday.

Some haemophiliacs will be able to use genetically-engineered blood clotting factors and safe supplies could be imported from abroad. Products to be withdrawn will continue in use, with tests before being administered, until replacements are found.

Treatments like growth factor for haemophiliacs or albumin supplies for burn victims are pooled from up to 66,000 donors at a time. If just one is suffering from CJD, and if the disease could be spread by blood — itself unknown — then in theory huge numbers could be at risk.

Drug companies have been advised to stop using UK blood products in vaccines and other products. The vaccines routinely used to immunise children do not contain UK albumin — although treatments for rabies and botulism do.

The decision will not leave patients helpless on emergency operating tables. The authorities will balance risk against need until new supplies can be found.

Last year health officials discovered that three of the 23 people who contracted nvCJD, the human version of bovine spongiform encephalopathy, had been blood donors. Batches of albumin and other products were recalled and destroyed.

Changes will be sporadic and take months: the Committee on the Safety of Medicines will examine alternative supplies and balance the long-term risk to patients against urgent needs.

The Health Secretary, Frank Dobson, said yesterday: "These measures recommended to page 3, column 7

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Moments later Mr Smith was back. His voice husky with optimism, he offered "real hope to those who have suffered the legacy of the failed policies of the party opposite".

Mike Gapes, another backbencher, proved that imitation is the sincerest form of obsequiousness. He contrasted the present govern-

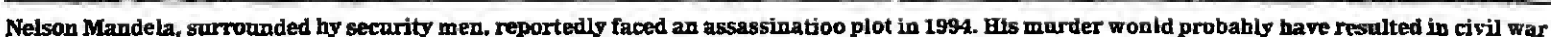
them talk. The excellent Alan Keoo (Lab, Feltham) said he had long wanted to see Yesterday in Parliament scrapped and the material slotted into the Today programme. "If it is a useful, interesting or vital debate, yes — but not filling the same slot with stuff we wouldn't bother to go 50 yards down the corridor to listen to."

Parties face spending cap

others. "The same principle should surely apply nationally as well," an official said.

Labour proposes a further cap on "third party spending" of 10 per cent of the national cap. That would imply that trade unions could continue to run pro-Labour advertising campaigns.

There is nothing in Lord's proposals that would stop the "Ecclestone affair" happening again, recommending only one change to its existing practice, suggesting that individual donations over £5,000 should be published quarterly. Until now, Barry has published the names of big donors only in the annual accounts presented to party conference in the autumn.



PHOTOGRAPH: DON MCPHEE

Security police 'plotted Mandela assassination'

Informer says he was hired to kill president at 1994 inauguration

RIGHTWING extremists plotted to assassinate Nelson Mandela at his presidential inauguration ceremony, in front of guests including Yasser Arafat, the Duke of Edinburgh and Fidel Castro, it was alleged yesterday.

Members of the South African police force's now defunct

security branch hired an extreme-right hitman to shoot Mr. Mandela as he was being sworn in at front of worldwide television audiences in 1994, according to reports which surfaced in Cape Town.

The extraordinary story — with echoes of the plot of Frederick Forsyth's thriller, *The Day of the Jackal* — emerged after an informer claimed that he was to have been the trigger man in an attempted murder which, if it

had succeeded, would have stunned the world and probably resulted in civil war.

Yesterday the head of a special team of detectives, the presidential investigations task unit, accused another senior commander of "errand-ing his inquiries into the conspiracy."

Yesterday's late editions of a Cape Town newspaper, the Cape Argus, reported that the head of the unit, Andre Lincoln, had accused the commander of the violent crimes unit, Leonard Knipe, of obstructing the inquiry.

Last week Mr Knipe arrested Mr Lincoln on charges

The report, believed to have been based on a hurried briefing by Mr Lincoln, said a senior police officer in Fresno had been arrested in connection with an assassination plot and two "high-powered snipers' rifles" seized.

The newspaper quoted Mr Lincoln as saying his unit was "at an advanced stage of a probe into third force activities involving top policemen." The term "third force" refers to supposed conspiracies by rightwing security force personnel to wreck the peace pro-

Behind Mr Lincoln's outburst lies a story of bitter rivalry within the police service.

Willem Frederick Else, currently serving a three-year sentence for theft, is understood to have told Archbishop Desmond Tutu's truth commission that he was hired by security police for 250,000 rand (\$31,000) to shoot Mr Mandela as he was being sworn in.

Else claimed he was given a rifle, complete with telescopic sight, several months before the presidential inauguration.

and told to practise. He pulled out after being tipped off that the security branch officers who had hired him planned to shoot him immediately after the assassination and claim he credit.

Mr Lincoln's unit, which has been investigating Else's story, has been the subject of much controversy since it was founded in 1996.

As commander, Mr Lincoln reports directly to the deputy president, Thabo Mbeki, bypassing the national police commissioner, George Fivaz. This has made his unit the target of much antipathy in

Old black magic still casts a spell

THIS is the RSC's third revival of Shakespeare's island fling in five seasons. And, while Adrian Noble's production has a surpassing visual elegance, one looks in vain for an explanation of the play's colonial politics or psychological darkness.

David Calder as Prospero brings out very strongly the character's exuberant delight in controlling others. He describes how "grave as my command have waked sleepers" in the tones of a man exhilarated by that old black magic.

He also charts clearly the progress from vengeance to virtue, and hints at a Freudian omnipotence complex in the way he flinches at Ariel's slightest touch.

It is a well executed perfor-

Irish ask for whom the bell tolls

IT IS the most played item on national radio and television in the Republic of Ireland: every day, twice a day, the Angelus bell washes over the airwaves, signalling a time for prayer and reflection. But the distinctive toll is now embroiled in a fight for survival.

to one religio abate
others." Into this waded
Robin Eames, Primate of
the Church of Ireland and
Archbishop of Armagh.
who told Mr Byrnes that he
felt the Angelus should be
changed. It could be
deemed exclusive, he
suggested.

Dr Eames wrote: "There
is an established church in
the Republic of Ireland and
it may well now be timely
to inculcate a more inclu-

Patten consults lawyer on book

CHRIS Patten, the former governor of Hong Kong, is set to take legal action against the publishers HarperCollins after an alleged attempt to tone down a critical book he is writing about China.

Mr Patten confirmed yesterday that the dispute over how HarperCollins and its owner, Rupert Murdoch,

He has told friends that he was angered by his treatment by the publishers who are thought to have paid a \$150,000 advance for the book. Mr Murdoch was said to have called for critical passages to be changed because he feared it could harm his interests in China and his hopes to expand.

Yesterday the Guardian revealed that Stuart Proffitt,

He is editor-in-chief of HarperCollins and editor of Mr Patten's book, had resigned over the issue. Mr Patten has now renewed the publishing deal to Macmillan.

Jonathan Dimbleby, who made the critically acclaimed BBC documentary on Mr Patten's final days in Hong Kong, said: "It looks as though HarperCollins, at a recent senior level, have decided that a book which one of the best political editors in Britain believes to be outstanding is

not worth publishing. There can be two reasons for that. Either they are bonkers or they have ulterior motives."

Mr Patten, in France completing the final chapters, said he was determined the book should be published in the way that he thought fit. "I am adamant that my book will be read the way I intended it. It is going to be quite a story."

Killing Rupert, page 12:

In The Week tomorrow
The Me-First Generation

Have twentysomethings
lost the power to care?

Well red

Eric Hobsbawm on 150 years of the Communist Manifesto

Plus Uri Geller interview

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The Sporting Life

The going looks poor for racing paper facing £685,000 bill

Racing trio win libel stakes

Jamie Wilson and John Duncan report

THE Sporting Life, the bible of the turf, faces a bill of £685,000 after a jury found the newspaper guilty of libel over claims that the trainer Lynda Ramsden, her husband Jack Ramsden, and champion jockey Kieren Fallon had arranged for one of their horses to lose a race.

The trio had sued the publishers MGN Ltd over a "savage verbal onslaught" in an unsigned editorial in May 1996 which accused them of "cheating punters". The jury found against the paper and awarded Mrs Ramsden £75,000, Mr Fallon £70,000, and Mr Ramsden £50,000. The newspaper's costs are estimated at £500,000.

Mr Fallon was not in court for the verdict. After winning the 3.35 at Lingfield on Master Caster, he was told of the result by Mr Ramsden on the telephone. "We won the case and you got seventy grand," Mr Ramsden told him. "We'll talk later. Anyway, well done."

The Sporting Life editor, Tom Clarke, said: "We have to accept the jury's verdict and we do. We are bitterly disappointed. The jury accepted that we honestly believed in the truth of our allegations, which were honestly made."

The case focused on a minor race, the Swaffham Handicap at Newmarket on April 18 1996, in which the favourite, Top Cees, a horse trained by the Ramsdens and ridden by Mr Fallon, finished a disappointing fifth.

During the trial Mr Fallon was accused by Richard Hartley, QC for the newspaper, of ignoring opportunities to win the race and holding the horse back, accusations he denied under oath.

The Sporting Life alleged that the Ramsdens had told

Mr Fallon to lose so as to give the horse better odds in a more important race three weeks later — the Chester Cup — which Top Cees won easily. The paper ran an article the next day accusing the trio of "cheating punters".

The paper's key evidence came from Derek Thompson, the television commentator who testified that Mr Fallon had told him that he had been instructed by Mr Ramsden to hold the horse back. Mr Fallon told the court that Mr Thompson's story was a complete lie. The judge told the jury to treat Mr Thompson's evidence with caution as it differed from an unsworn statement he had given to the newspaper's lawyers.

There was some comfort for The Sporting Life that the jury did not find the article "malicious". This was reflected in the damages awarded.

Alastair Down, who wrote the article, said: "We fought a good fight but we got beat and there is no point whingeing about it. It's not been a good day for the press."

Mr Ramsden looked relieved after 18 days in court. "It was harrowing to think that some people thought we were liars and cheats," he said.

The bulk of his anger was directed at Mr Thompson. "To come in at the eleventh hour and to tell a story like that about Fallon was utterly contemptible," he said.

Mr Thompson, who was yesterday working for Channel 4 Racing at Huntingdon, said: "I am disappointed by the outcome but as I said I had no axe to grind with either side."

"I told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I feel very sad that the judge rubbished me on what I said."

'We are bitterly disappointed. We honestly believed in the truth of our allegations'

Sporting Life editor Tom Clarke, right



Jack and Lynda Ramsden outside the High Court after their victory over the Sporting Life

PHOTOGRAPH SEAN SMITH

Runners and riders

Gambler who wins £200,000 a year by backing his wife's horses — but only if he can get good value from the bookies

JACK RAMSDEN and his wife, Lynda, are the epitome of the successful modern couple: assured, good-looking, rich (properties in London and the country), with two grown-up children.

Although Mrs Ramsden, aged 48, holds the training licence and looks after the horses, he is the brains behind the business run from Breckenbrough House near Thirsk in North Yorkshire.

A former stockbroker, Mr Ramsden, who looks younger than his 56 years, makes no bones about betting being his major source of income and has boasted about regularly winning between £100,000 and £200,000 a year, mostly on horses trained by his wife.

When he puts his money down he expects to collect and therefore has to be pretty certain the horse is capable of doing the job.

He will not back one of his horses, however strongly it might be fancied, unless he can get value from the bookmakers. In other words, the odds have to be better than its chance. This is the key to successful betting.

The libel case has hinged on this area. Was Top Cees trying at Newmarket? Mr Ramsden said he did not have a bet because the price was too short, although the owner, Alan Leonard, reportedly had £400 each-way.

Mrs Ramsden began training in 1987 and quickly built a reputation for being clever at placing her horses to win handicaps.

The stables, converted from an old farmhouse and

harnes, have expanded to 50 boxes and so successful have the Ramsdens been that every year the yard has been full. Last season they won £440,998 in win and place prize money on the flat.

Kieren Fallon, the 33-year-old Irish jockey who rode Top Cees, was Mrs Ramsden's retained rider until leaving to join champion trainer Henry Cecil at Newmarket at the beginning of last year. This was a highly successful move for Fallon, who won two Classics and became champion jockey with 196 winners.

He is a quietly spoken, shy man but this pleasant exterior masks a steely resolve and a fiery temper.

Toilet, the TV commentator game for a laugh, whose credibility finally went down the pan

THE Channel 4 anchorman Brough Scott has always spoken out in defence of fellow commentator and ubiquitous racing personality Derek Thompson. The Scott view is that the eternally grinning Thommo displays an enviable command of modern-day broadcasting skills. Is he not a man who will take a microphone into a crowd at a moment's notice and ask enthusiastic questions without embarrassment or shame?

Thompson's critics feel this indiscriminate bombast is exactly the problem. The Thompson approach, they say, is shallow and insincere.

Thompson, aged 47 — race-course nickname Toilet — has been working in front of the cameras since 1982. Yet he remains sensitive about his image and will not be regarded as a man in the know.

There were predictably ribald comments when it emerged that the disputed

conversation with Kieren Fallon, at the heart of the Sporting Life case, took place when Thompson interrupted the jockey while he was on his way to a lavatory.

Patrick Milmo QC, representing Fallon and Jack and Lynda Ramsden, painted a cruel picture of a second-rate figure trying to bolster his reputation in the eyes of his colleagues by embellishing a casual encounter.

The thousands of viewers who enjoy the light-hearted side of Channel 4's racing coverage will no doubt be hoping Thompson has emerged with his good humour intact.

Profiles by Jamie Reid



Derek Thompson

Hard man of the Opera House gets sack

Dan Glaister Arts Correspondent

KEITH Cooper, who leapt into the public consciousness when he was seen in the television documentary The House brutally sacking a colleague because he did not have "the intelligence to deliver what we need", has fallen victim to the latest purge of senior management at the Royal Opera House.

Mr Cooper, until recently the ROH's head of corporate affairs, was sacked yesterday by the company's board. Finance director Richard Hall, who has been with the ROH for just eight months, was also dismissed.

A terse statement from the Opera House said: "The Board of the ROH have endorsed proposals for restructuring the ROH management to provide a more focused executive team. The organisation announces the departure of Richard Hall, finance director, and Keith Cooper, director of sales and broadcasting."

The composer Michael Berkeley, a member of the board, said: "There was a general feeling that the marketing needed a new look. There was a feeling that we'd been lacklustre on the marketing side."

The decision was approved by the board on Wednesday. Mr Cooper, who joined the ROH in November 1992, was informed of the decision yesterday morning. He immediately left the Opera House, which is bound to pay him a three-month notice period.

Richard Hall, appointed eight months ago by the then chairman, Lord Chaildington, and the ROH's then chief executive, Genista McIntosh, makes way for Pabam Allen, who has been on secondment from the City accountants Coopers and Lybrand.

It is understood that Mr Allen was unhappy with the pace of change at the ROH. His salary will be paid by the Floral Trust, the charitable body that bailed out the ROH last year.

The timing of the changes is something of a surprise. It had been thought that with the upheaval at the ROH following the publication of a highly critical parliamentary report last year, including the resignations of the entire board, further changes would be put on hold. Sir Richard Eyre is due to deliver his report into the provision of opera and ballet in London in May.

The dismissals are thought to be the work of Sir Colin Southgate, who took over as chairman at the beginning of the year. A spokeswoman for the ROH said that Sir Colin had pledged to look at the areas of finance and marketing, and this was precisely what he had done.

Gerald Kaufman, chairman of the parliamentary committee, said: "Maybe Sir Colin is getting things done. But it's a very worrying situation. It's three months since our report and there has been not a peep about the two most pressing matters: the deficit and the plans for the closure period."

Mr Berkeley warned of further upheavals. "I don't think this is the end," he said. "We've got to go through every single department. It's our duty to the people who work there. The only way we can really justify the money we get is to be absolutely ruthless."



Keith Cooper: victim of the latest Covent Garden purge

CJD fears force withdrawal of British blood products

continued from page 1
mended by the CSM are precautionary. They do not mean that UK blood and blood products are unsafe. We have evidence to show that vCJD can be transmitted via blood products or blood — the risk remains only hypothetical. But we must proceed on the principle that it is better to be safe than sorry."

Blood is a mix of a liquid known as plasma and red and white blood cells. The blood products are refined from the plasma. These fall into three groups: clotting factors; albumin used for the treatment of shock and burns and immunoglobulins used in the treatment of blood diseases.

Donated blood can spread diseases — HIV and hepatitis are notorious examples — but there is no less fear around who might be incubating CJD and no way of recognising the agent in donated blood.

Dr Jeremy Metters, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, said that blood supplies were as vital as ever. "There is absolutely no question of any risk to blood donors or recipients from CJD. We still need just as much blood for transfusion as before. Donated blood is vital to the work of the NHS."

Genetically-engineered or synthetic factor VIII will now be available for children under 16. The Haemophilia Society yesterday called this a "major victory for common sense".

But patients who need immediate transfusions will go on getting whole blood: the risk to them would be vanishingly small, and the danger in not getting a transfusion would be huge.

Even so, the change could annually affect 100,000 surgical patients, up to 90,000 pregnant women and tens of thousands who need hepatitis vaccines, tetanus immunisation and special diagnostic treatment.

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4 BRITAIN

Antigravity find stuns scientists

Tim Radford
Science Editor

AN international team of astronomers is about to set the world of physics reeling. They have observed antigravity in action and say they have confirmed that the expansion of the universe is accelerating.

"My reaction is somewhere between amazement and horror," Brian Schmidt of the Mt Stromlo and Siding Spring Observatory in Australia, told the US journal Science, published today. "Amazement because I just did not expect this result and horror in knowing it will likely be disbelieved by a majority of astronomers."

Adam Reiss of the University of California at Berkeley said last night: "What we expected to find was that the universe would be expanding more slowly today than back then, because gravity has this effect that it slows everything down. What we found was the opposite of that. The universe is expanding faster today than yesterday and it seems to be accelerating."

In Science, astronomers from California, Boston and Australia say they have direct observational evidence that the expansion of the universe is speeding up.

Since gravity is a brake upon the expansion that began with the Big Bang about 15 billion years ago, then there must be some other countervailing force. They call it a repulsive force, or antigravity. On a scale of half

the universe, it seems to be twice as strong as gravity. If so, it will force cosmologists to dream up a new history of space and time.

The astronomers discovered the runaway universe by focusing on supernovae — the bursts of energy mark the death of stars — at various distances.

The light from very distant supernovae would be light that left those stars billions of years ago. Light travels at a constant speed for all observers, but the way the starlight itself is "stretched" is a clue to how fast the star is moving away from the observer. The astronomers expected distant stars to be moving more slowly than recent ones. They were not.

"Statistically speaking, we are quite confident of this result," said Dr Reiss. "But we continue to be concerned that there is another explanation for what we are seeing, some other sneaky effect that is getting in there."

The scientists considered the possibility that supernovae in the past might be different from those today; that stars may have evolved in the way creatures do. They do not think so.

So they are left with antigravity. "The problem with this force is that on a small scale it is very weak," said Dr Reiss. "You have to get to these amazing scales like half way across the universe, where this force adds up, because it is inherent in every little piece of space. As you add up this space, it multiplies, and eventually becomes strong enough to detect."



A violin made in 1727 by the great Antonio Stradivari went on show yesterday before being auctioned in London on April 1. Forty years ago it sold for £15,000, but is now expected to make up to £250,000.

PHOTOGRAPH: GRAHAM TURNER

Blair and Irish PM agree to push for peace deal

Ewen MacAskill, Chief
Political Correspondent

TONY Blair and the Irish prime minister, Bertie Ahern, decided yesterday to step up efforts to finalise a peace agreement before

Easter. Meeting at Downing Street, they also discussed the awkward question of whether Mr Blair should bow to Sinn Féin's demand for a meeting before it rejoins the talks.

The Ulster Democratic Party yesterday threatened to leave the talks if Mr Blair

meets Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Féin. The Ulster Unionists also warned Mr Blair against such a move. A Downing Street spokesman said no decision had yet been made.

Both leaders publicly expressed optimism that the

deadline could be reached. A peace package will have to be agreed early in April, the deal sanctioned by Westminster and the Irish parliament, and referendums held north and south of the border in May.

Mr Blair said: "I remain cautiously, perhaps even stubbornly, optimistic."

Northern Ireland "tears at my heart", he said. "I can't believe as we approach the 21st century that it's beyond our wit or imagination to do it."

Mr Ahern echoed Mr Blair's assertion that the recent bomb attacks in Portadown and Moira — attributed to a republican splinter group, Continuity IRA — would not "derail" the process.

Earlier at a press conference in London, Sinn Féin's

vice-chairman, Martin McGuinness, attempted to put pressure on Mr Blair by saying it was inevitable that he would agree to meet Sinn Féin: "It is going to happen. It is only a question of when it will happen. I hope it will take place sooner rather than later."

But he refused to say that Sinn Féin's return to the talks on March 9 was conditional on Mr Blair's meeting it either beforehand or shortly afterwards.

He wanted a promise from Mr Blair of genuine negotiations, accusing the Ulster Unionists of failing to engage, and movement on reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, release of prisoners, and troop reductions.

Ken Maginnis, the Ulster

Unionist spokesman on security, warned Mr Blair: "If the Prime Minister either sees Gerry Adams during his period of expulsion or agrees during that period that he will see him at the end of that period, then he will demean the whole process."

But the Ulster Unionists were not threatening a walk-out if Mr Blair did agree. "We are over going to tie ourselves to a hypothetical assessment," said Mr Maginnis.

Gary McMichael, leader of the UDP, which has close links with the loyalist paramilitaries, met Mr Blair yesterday morning. He said his party's position would be "untenable" if Mr Blair met Sinn Féin, but stopped short of saying categorically he would leave the talks.

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Bogus academic infiltrated Oxford 'to write book'

Sarah Hall

TO the average outsider, Oxford university — with its labyrinthine libraries and ivory towers — can seem an impenetrable place.

But to Richard Ray, a 31-year-old Asian graduate of Brunel university, infiltrating the hallowed seat of learning proved simple.

It was so easy, he masqueraded as an academic associated with the neo-classical Worcester College for five months, a court heard yesterday. He even inveigled his way into college life by saying Latin grace at a formal dinner, and dined with the Jamaican ambassador and

world land speed record holder Andy Green.

"It was in one sense a breathtakingly simple scam on his part," Paddy Roche, defending, told Oxford magistrates court. "You can't help but be left with a misguided admiration for the way in which he went about it."

The South African-born Ray came up with the idea when he worked temporarily in the university's library card-issuing office last summer.

"He produced one for himself representing himself as Dr Richard Ray," said Clare Tucker, prosecuting. With this passport, he gained a room in a house owned by Worcester College last Octo-

ber and got access to computers in the Bodleian Library and entry to Trinity College library.

In January suspicions were aroused and on arrest he confessed everything.

Speaking after the hearing — at which he admitted making a false instrument and gaining false services by deception — the unemployed graduate claimed that he had done it in order to write a book: "I think I first came to Oxford to establish why there were not many, or few, Asian dons ... and I wanted to immerse myself in the character to write about it ..."

Seotefcing was adjourned until the end of March.

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VSO fights recruitment drain

Third World charity blames selfishness for volunteer crisis

Owen Bowcott

VOLUNTARY Service Overseas, the charity which has sent workers to the underdeveloped world for the past 40 years, is suffering a severe recruitment crisis and yesterday blamed the "Cool Britannia" boom.

Britons in the "feel great" society have become "more selfish and less caring" about underprivileged parts of the globe, the organisation claimed.

In the past two years, applications have slumped by more than 20 per cent. Teachers and engineers are down by half.

Launching its report, entitled *Where's Everybody Gone?*, the broadcaster and author Jonathan Dimbleby, who is on the VSO board, said: "People appear to be less concerned about the rest of the world than they used to be."

"Big City bonuses are back again. When there's a time of growth, the demand for skills and talent affects our ability to attract people."

But the shortfall may be more than a reflection of the latest economic upturn, VSO fears. "For all Tony Blair's talk of a caring, sharing society and post-Diana compassion, there are many signs that people have become more selfish and less caring,"

the report says. Higher graduate salaries may also be tempting more college-leavers to stay on a career ladder once they have landed a job. The average wage for a new graduate is now £15,500.

Education is also blamed. Government rhetoric has not been matched by lessons in the classroom. An NOP poll for VSO earlier this year found that 85 per cent of 12 to 16-year-olds would like to help people in the developing world but "daily life makes them forget".

Decreased coverage of development affairs, particularly on television, has reduced awareness of the problems in the Third World.

"Britain is becoming more insular. There has been nothing in the 1990s like the breakthrough of Live Aid in the 1980s," the report quotes Paddy Coulter, of the International Broadcasting Trust.

Most foreign programmes are about wildlife. "The main factual programmes have lost their global perspective and the new documentary soaps are all about Brits."

But the charity recognises that nine out of 10 people aged between 15 and 25 have never heard of VSO; that many who have, believe the charity will send school leavers abroad; and that volunteers worry whether their experience will enhance their job prospects when they return.

The charity received 1,400 fewer applications for this year, and will have 200 fewer volunteers overseas compared with last year, around 1,750. Their average age is 34. Past volunteers include many well-known public figures. Six present MPs have worked for the charity: the former Tory minister Allister Goodlad, the Liberal Democrat David Rendell, and four Labour members — Jeremy Corbyn, Mike Gapes, Judith Church and Hilary Armstrong.

Several broadcasters, including Peter Soow, Mike Brunson and Brian Hanrahan, as well as the chief constable of West Mercia, David Blakey, have also worked on development projects overseas for the charity.

To make VSO more attractive to future volunteers it plans to subsidise Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) courses, offer shorter placements than the normal two-year contracts; promote VSO experience as career enhancement to employers; and negotiate leave of absence with NHS trusts.

VSO has also begun recruiting volunteers from Canada, Portugal and the Netherlands to make up its skills shortage.

"There's evidence that people in the Netherlands have greater awareness of development issues," Nick Barratt, a senior manager, suggested.

Lawyer found his island in the sun

Owen Bowcott

PHILIP Kells (right) was a commercial litigation specialist with a City firm earning more than £40,000 a year when he threw it all in and volunteered to become a "people's lawyer" in the south Pacific.

Most of his court appearances were made in flip-flops, shorts and a T-shirt. His pay was under £200 a month, but his job satisfaction soared.



As a VSO worker in Tuvalu — an archipelago of nine islands spread across 180 miles of ocean — from 1983 to 1996, he was the only lawyer available to help locals in civil and criminal cases.

"My practice included representing defendants in murder and rape trials as well as advising the prime minister," recalls Mr Kells, now aged 35. "There was a little company law and lots of magic — cases where people claimed that spells had been cast on them."

Sometimes life felt isolated. Tuvalu — part of what was once known as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands — has a population of only 10,000. "But I saw the advertisement for a people's lawyer and that sold it."

"I did a master's degree in human rights so I was already interested in the field. Being single may have helped. 'It would be difficult living in a small community like that if your partner didn't have a job. I didn't go for the money.'"

"There were problems with food. Temperatures were in the 90s every day, with 100 per cent humidity. The beauty of the job, however, was that I was entirely on my own apart from the secretary and translator."

He now practises for Public Concern at Work, a London-based legal organisation supporting whistleblowers.

"When I went back to my old university recently I was amazed," he recalls. "Everyone seemed so normal, much less radical. I remember having endless sit-ins and protests."

Pull the other one...

John Ezzard

ONE OF the traditions which does most to unite family and friends over Christmas dinner comes under threat today from an advert in the *Stage* newspaper.

If the Asda supermarket chain has its way, there will be no more happy collective groans next December 25 about the awfulness of the jokes that drop out of Christmas crackers.

The chain has discovered what most of its customers could have told its executives decades ago — most of

the jokes are up to 150 years old and are getting no better with age.

By Asda's count, all the 170 million crackers sold in Britain every year rely on recycling the same 500 jokes.

So it is offering generous bribes to the *Stage's* largely unemployed readership of stage, television, film and radio artists and writers. It wants them to come up with a new crop of wisecracks worthy of the spirit of 1999 and the millennium.

But the rules for the new corporate pot of joke writers are firm in this

quest for "alternative" cracker comedy. Dirty talk of the sort associated with Ben Elton, Jo Brand or Jerry Sadowitz is off limits.

Gags must be "rib-tickling" but "antithetical for every family member" and "capable of amusing without causing offence".

Last night comedian and writer Ken Campbell tried to help Asda. But he said: "It's dreadfully hard. No wonder there are only 500 jokes. It's almost as difficult to think up new ones as it must have been with the old ones." He came up with one, on a 1990s topic though in classical mould:

What do virtual school-girls play?
Inter-Netball.

Under the chain's rules, each applicant for the post must submit 100 gags.

An undisclosed "attractive but not huge amount" will be paid for each joke that is used, and gagwriters will get the career boost of a credit on the cracker slip.

Phil Reed, an Asda manager, said that traditionally cracker manufacturers had had to "search high and low for jokes, and beg borrow and steal them."

But, he added: "They still make you cringe."

It's a cracker

What goes com, com, com?
A cow walking backwards.

What do you get if you walk under a cow?
A pat on the head.

What do you call a sheep with a ribbon tied round its neck?
Ram-bow.

A ghost walks into a pub and asks for a whisky. The barman says:
Sorry, we don't serve spirits.

Why did the tomato blush?
It saw the salad dressing.

Life for faking wife's suicide

Sailing club commodore was 'ruthless but plausible'

David Ward and Martin Walwright

ASAILING club commodore who strangled his wife and then faked her suicide by hanging her body from the bannister at their home was jailed for life yesterday.

Paul Longworth, aged 38, an ophthalmic technician, mouthed "No, you are wrong" at the jury in Liverpool crown court as they returned a guilty verdict after four hours.

Mr Justice Hadden told Longworth that the killing — after a row but described in court as a sexual assault — had "snuffed out a life in a brutal act".

The court had heard that Longworth, former commodore of Southport Sailing Club, had previously beaten and raped his wife, Tina, aged 29, at their home in the Merseyside town.

The judge told him he had committed the murder "for your own selfish reasons without any regard for the two children who were hers and yours."

"You passed yourself off as a good father, but your taking away of the children's mother was a callous, violent and wicked act which has caused the dreadful loss which you have inflicted on them for the rest of their lives."

Detective Inspector Bob Morrison, who led the "long and complex" inquiry, said Longworth was ruthless and callous but also highly plausible. A measure of this was that his wife's family — including her sister, who sobbed in court after the verdict — had supported him throughout the trial.

The conviction is thought to be only the second of its kind in the country. Eddie Gilfoyle, of Wirral, Merseyside, was found guilty in 1993 in the same court room of hanging his wife and faking her suicide.

Longworth's attack took place on his birthday in January last year as the children, Abby, aged seven, and Matthew, five, slept upstairs. He then suspended the body from the staircase in an attempt to show that his wife had killed herself.

He called an ambulance with a 999 call described to the court as "hysterical and distressed". While paramedics searched for signs of life in his wife, he cradled her head in his arms and stroked her hair.

The play almost worked. Police thought they were dealing with a clear-cut case of suicide. But a senior detective was puzzled by marks on Mrs Longworth's neck and ordered a post mortem.

One of the grizzlier mo-



Paul Longworth... hung body from bannister

ments of the trial came when the jury saw two videos showing attempts to recreate Mrs Longworth's "suicide" on the staircase. Iain West, director of forensic medicine at Guy's hospital, London, first hung dummies and then himself from the bannisters.

"It is potentially a very dangerous procedure," he admitted to the jury. "You protect the blood supply to the brain by putting your hand between the rope and your neck, preventing pressure on the vein and artery in the right side."

He had been able to replicate a horizontal mark on Mrs Longworth's neck only by wrapping the rope round his neck twice and facing the stairs. Longworth had told detectives that he had found his wife hanging with her back to the stairs when he came home from celebrating his birthday at the sailing club.

Dr West identified 38 marks on Mrs Longworth's body and said he had never seen a case of hanging with so many injuries. Their pattern was consistent "with an initial period of strangulation followed by suspension of the deceased's body". That opinion seemed to convince the jury.

Longworth had told police that his wife had killed herself during a fit of depression. But the court heard that she had taken her contraceptive pill on the night of her death and had discussed with a friend whether she should move in with her lover — a fireman with whom she had been having an affair for seven months and who she had been with on the night before her death.

Her diary and letters to her grandfather were upbeat and cheerful.

The couple's rows were common knowledge at the club. The court heard that three weeks before the murder Longworth looked on as his wife's dignity capsize. As she sank beneath the water, he told another club member: "The only trouble is she's coming up."

After the sentencing, Det Insp Morrison said: "Although I am pleased with the result, the sad reality is that two children have now lost their father as well as their mother."

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6 BRITAIN

Ambitious Irish scale job heights in Britain

Survey overturns stereotype of all-brawn, no-brain navvies

Owen Bowcott

THE Irish in Britain are better qualified, more ambitious and higher up the corporate ladder than their British counterparts, according to a survey today.

Overturning centuries of crude racial stereotyping — portraying the Irish as gormless navvies or terrorist suspects — the report reflects a dramatic shift in immigration patterns and the success of the Irish economy.

Irish eyes certainly should be smiling, according to the study. One in six Irish men in Britain is earning more than £30,000, compared with one in

nine Britons. Even considering the figures for both men and women, the Irish are better paid.

"Forty years ago, Irish people came over with muscle and brawn to offer," said Douglas Baxter, chief executive of the Irish Post newspaper, which commissioned the survey.

"Now the pattern has changed, with skilled, well educated Irish people coming and securing high profile positions in British companies. As these people rise up the corporate ladder, the Irish influence in British businesses is growing."

The study, for which more than 6,000 people — born in the south or north of Ireland

— were interviewed, was carried out by the market research company BMRB.

Among prominent Irish figures who have risen to the top are Gerry Robinson, recently appointed chairman of the Arts Council, Brendan O'Neill, shortly to join ICI as chief executive officer, and Terry Leahy, chief executive of Tesco.

A reception at the Institute of Directors in London today, at which the main guest will be the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, will launch a book profiling the 150 most successful Irish people in Britain.

Last month the British Journal of Psychiatry published an article claiming that of all the racial minorities in Britain the Irish have the poorest mental and physical health and one of the highest levels of alcohol abuse. Much

of the information was based on statistics from the 1980s.

"The Irish community is no longer centred on communities like Kilburn in London or Digbeth in Birmingham," Mr Baxter said. "People feel far less discriminated against and far more integrated into the community. Their ghettoisation is over."

The improvement in Irish incomes has been rapid. Over the past five years the number earning more than £20,000 has increased by 50 per cent.

One in six Irish people in Britain has a degree; among women the figure is one in seven, compared with one in 10 British women. The Irish were also found to be more ambitious than their British counterparts.

Despite the academic advantages, many Irish people still believe their heritage will be a drawback. A quarter

of those in the 15-24 age group see their national background as a handicap at work.

There are around 800,000 Irish-born people in Britain, from both the republic and Northern Ireland. In London they are estimated to constitute 4 per cent of the population.

Those claiming Irish ancestry form an even larger proportion of the overall population. Around 7 per cent of people born in Britain have at least one Irish parent and 20 per cent have a family member from Ireland or have an Irish relative through marriage.

More Irish people are now returning to Ireland than are arriving in Britain. Those who leave are often older couples retiring, while the younger generation is arriving looking for fresh professional challenges.

Actor's ode to 'Wally' and the King rescued

Martin Wainwright

ANOTORIOUS but lost skit on the disastrous love affair between King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson has resurfaced in a moorland village — with fresh evidence that its author may have been the raconteur Stanley Holloway.

Recited around the world at the time of the King's abdication in 1936, Edward

and the Lioness may now join the official archive of the famous actor and comedian's celebrated monologues about Young Albert and Sergeant Samuel Snail.

Parodying the most famous saga, Albert and the Lion, the 19-verse poem in cod-Lancashire dialect describes how the King was swallowed alive by "that man-eating lioness Wally".

The story follows the Albert plot slavishly, down to the echo of Wallace, the

name of the irritable lion at Blackpool zoo which swallows Albert Ramsbottom whole.

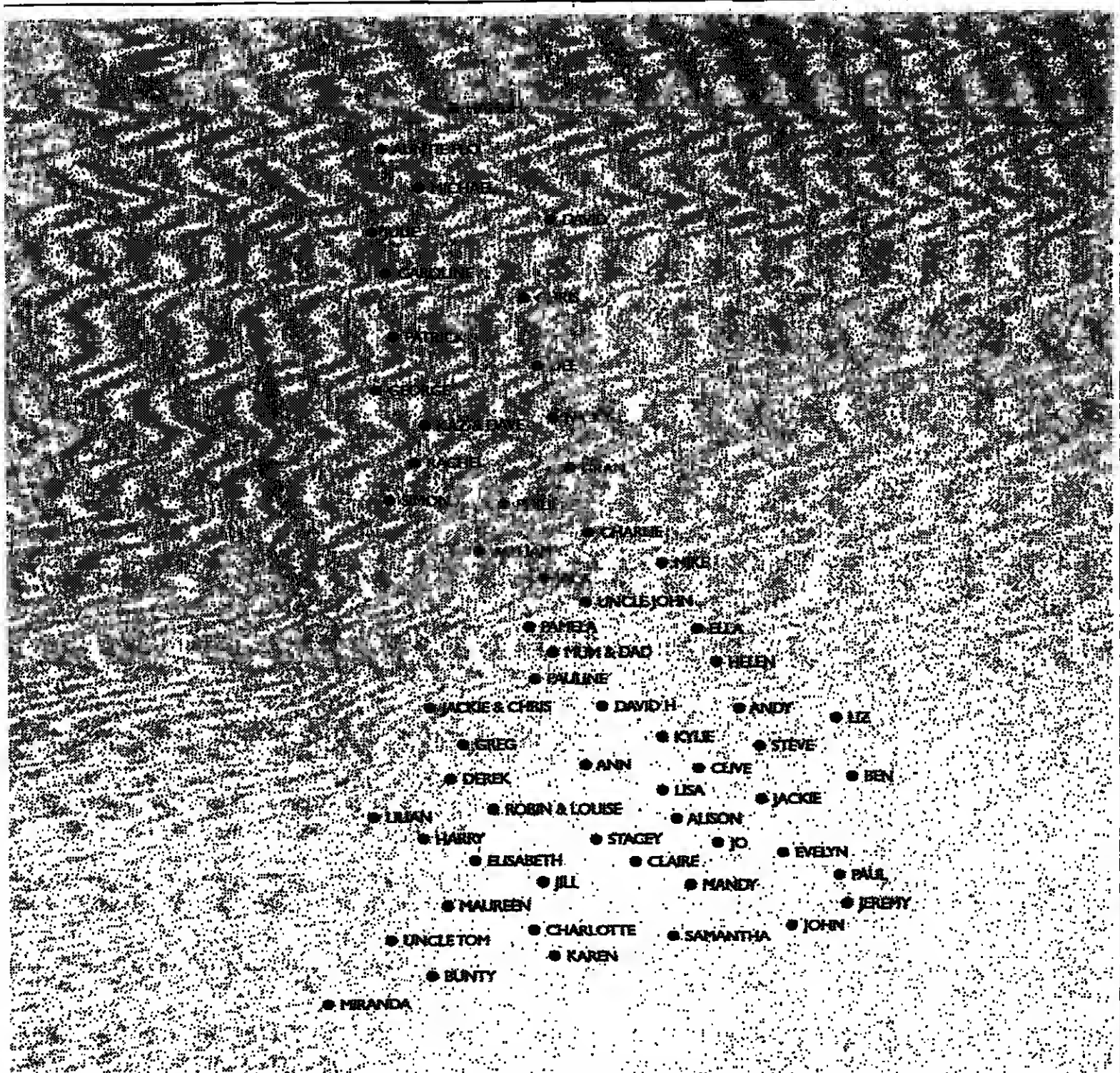
"Who else wrote like that?" said James Fawcett, 62, of Kirkcubright, North Yorkshire, who has recited the poem after 40 years. Never officially printed, it was taken down in shorthand on a transatlantic liner, when Holloway — who had never admitted authorship — recited it during a private

party at the captain's table. Mr Fawcett's parents, who were on the ship and also guests of the captain, sent a typescript to their son at Harrow school, where he learned it by heart. He said: "I lost the original typescript long ago, but I'd learned it all. I'm probably the only person who can recite it out in full."

Stylistic similarities are reinforced by typical Holloway wit as in the stanzas:

*Well, he went and took over his Kingdom,
But found his tasks not too light.
He saw to his realm in the daytime
And he saw Mrs Simpson at night.*

The complete poem will be added to a rich collection of Edward and Wallis rhymes, including "Bark the herald angels sing, Mrs Simpson's got our King" — the most popular carol of 1936.



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A leather-look safari outfit in the Central St Martins show

PHOTOGRAPH: STEFAN ROUSSEAU

War-zone parachutists parade in graduate show that spawns designer names of tomorrow

WHEN graduates of the Central St Martins MA fashion course presented their collections yesterday, it was worth paying attention, writes Susannah Barron.

This is not Britain's most famous fashion college for nothing: its alumni include John Galiano, Alexander McQueen, Sonja Nuttall, Fabio Piras, and Tristram Webber (this season's Next Big

Thing), who all staged shows in London this week.

Highlights yesterday included stiff pleated skirts by Matthew Priestley, and Gabrielle Greiss's scary fairies in Courtney Love-style organza dresses worn over black drainpipe jeans.

Best of all was a brilliantly crazed collection by Robert Cary-Williams, whose models looked as though they had

parachuted in from a war zone, wearing clingfilm on their feet, white all-in-ones with zips and bondage straps, and flesh leather jackets folded to look as though they had lain in the washing machine for several days.

Menswear was also strong: Thomas Textor's baggy white plaid shirts and floppy trousers, and Richard Capstick's bright sleeveless tops with graphic pony-head prints.

If this was the future of fashion (and, given Central St Martins' track record, it could well be), we will see neon lemon yellow in every man's wardrobe before long.

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Dobson moves to curb £200m NHS legal bill

Litigation: 'Ambulance chasers' are warned off

Michael White
Political Editor

THE Health Secretary Frank Dobson yesterday warned "ambulance chasers" in the legal profession who encourage NHS patients to sue for clinical negligence, that he intended to break the spiralling £200 million a year cost before it doubles by 2002.

Attacking the trend which consumes huge quantities of NHS time and money, he added: "We've got to stop it getting out of hand before we get the litigation culture they've got in the United States, where packets of nuts carry the warning 'this packet contains nuts' and a convenience meal bears the message 'after heating, contents will be hot'."

In the US huge court settlements are routinely justified by the high cost of health care for victims of negligence, a problem which is creeping into Britain.

Only a generation ago legal actions against the NHS were virtually non-existent, and usually confined to people who said "I don't want what happened to me to happen to others."

But the 1980s changed attitudes and also introduced contingency fees for lawyers, who could get payment by results.

The cost of handling such cases — including damages — from £18 million in 1983-84 to about £200 million this year.

It will rise by a further 25 per cent a year for five years, Department of Health officials fear.

"Not only do staff waste time in court, they increasingly practise defensive medicine," Mr Dobson told a Commons press gallery lunch. "Instead of asking themselves what's best for this patient, they are increasingly looking over their shoulder and asking how this will look in court," a long-established problem in US medicine.

Mr Dobson, currently backing in plaudits for his handling of his new department, told doctors and other medical staff that his new National Institute for Clinical Negligence will "help raise standards, reduce negligence and accidents and raise sub-standard services".

Only 17 per cent of cases succeeded in court, Mr Dobson said yesterday, so most of the patients involved got nothing.

Urging better services, he said: "We want explanations, not litigation, apologies, not inaction, excellence, not excuses."

Reports of proceedings shifted to long wave 'ghetto', says Kaufman



Deputy PM John Prescott interviewed by John Humphrys in BBC TV's On the Record, one of the corporation's political programmes under review

Welfare: Leaks get minister in trouble again

Harman to unveil deal for women

Lucy Ward
Political Correspondent

HARRIET Harman will today seek to underline the Government's commitment to women's issues in a Commons debate the day after leaks of childcare plans brought her plaudits from outside Westminster and more speculation on her future within.

In the first major debate on the Government's priorities for women since the general election, the Social Security Secretary will outline a catalogue of measures including proposals to encourage family-friendly working, changes to pensions, and steps to tackle violence against women.

Ms Harman will also formally unveil plans for an April green paper on childcare, which will incorporate plans — expected to be announced in the Budget on March 17 — for a childcare tax credit for low-income families.

The proposals, disclosed in the Guardian earlier this week, were welcomed by childcare pressure groups including the Daycare Trust, which has campaigned for a tax credit scheme, and the Pre-School Learning Alliance. The Daycare Trust director, Colette Kelleher, said: "The Government has moved a long way forward. The first planks of real progress on childcare are now there."

However, the leaking of details of the scheme, which will help to compensate lone parents for the benefit cuts which provoked a rebellion by 47 Labour MPs last Decem-

ber, prompted renewed focus on Ms Harman's handling of her brief amid government plans for fundamental welfare reform.

Leaks were perceived in some quarters as a deliberate attempt by allies of Ms Harman to bolster her reputation. Some felt attempts to demonstrate her concern for women's and childcare issues had done more harm than good.

Benefit rebels condemned Ms Harman and the party leadership for failing to make clear in the autumn that lone parent benefit cuts would be made up in other ways.

However, Tony Blair, asked in an interview yesterday whether he was happy with Ms Harman's handling of the welfare issue, voiced support. "She's shown huge courage and determination in very difficult circumstances," he told ITN. The "easiest thing" for a social security secretary was to come along and say "Give me more money", he said.

Critics of Ms Harman were quick to seize on an interview with BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour yesterday in which she called a halt to the discussion just as she was asked about a call in the Mirror newspaper for her resignation. She told interviewer Jenni Murray: "I'm sorry, it's not just because you're asking that question, I must go, sorry, sorry."

Pressed for an answer, she insisted: "I've got another thing to do, then I've got to go to Cabinet. Sorry — can't, can't, can't, bye."

The shadow Leader of the House, Gillian Shephard, commented: "We must all have sympathy for Harriet Harman. She's clearly not being supported by her colleagues or by No 10 and the strain is showing."

But Ms Harman's aides rejected suggestions that she had been unwilling to face up to the reports. Broadcasters had continued to press her even though they knew she had a Cabinet meeting.

Straw hosts talks on home ground

John Duncan
Sports Correspondent

THE Home Secretary, Jack Straw, will be in Marseille for England's opening game to demonstrate the Government's determination to rid Britain of its football hooligan image.

"This is extremely important to our reputation abroad, and it is also important in terms of our bid for the World Cup in 2006," Mr Straw said yesterday. "We are committed to doing all that we can to ensure that the games pass off well and that English fans do not act as hooligans or criminals."

"That does not guarantee that there won't be trouble. It can't. But I think the British public wants to know that we are doing our best, and I think the French public wants to know that too."

Mr Straw was in Paris on Tuesday, where senior British diplomats are meeting daily to discuss preparations. He has discussed the World Cup with his French counterpart, Jean-Pierre Chevènement.

Mr Straw is host to a two-day Policing of Football seminar, beginning today in his Blackburn constituency, for more than 100 government, police and football delegates from 26 countries.

The largest delegation to the seminar, which opens this morning at Blackburn Rovers' Ewood Park stadium, is from France, including the World Cup police chief, George Querry, and the organisers' head of security, Dominique Spinoletti. They will visit two English league matches at the weekend.

Mr Straw is expected to announce today a package of agreements with French police on co-operation and intelligence-sharing aimed at preventing known hooligans from leaving Britain.

"There are certain natural consequences that go with being a free country," said Mr Straw. "One is that you can't stop people leaving the country, and you can't stop EU citizens entering another EU country unless there are clear and legally justified reasons."

However, French police do have authority to prevent anyone from entering if they feel it would be "contrary to the public good".



England expects... the positive face of football fervour

Premier League fans worry where their cash is going as cost of watching football spirals up to £850 a year

John Duncan

THE spiralling cost of watching football has been highlighted by the latest survey of Premier League football fans, published yesterday, which found that fans spent an average of £758 a year on travel and tickets for matches last season, with Manchester United fans spending an average of £1,248 following their team.

On top of that fans spent an average of £109 on club merchandise such as replica shirts though there was general satisfaction at the amount of merchandise being pushed to supporters at what some have said are inflated prices. The clubs were

recently sent a letter from the Office of Fair Trading over shops who complained that they were being pressured into keeping prices artificially high.

Fans are less keen, however, on where the money is going. The survey, which received responses from 28,122 supporters, found that 42 per cent of fans thought players' wages were "way too high" with a further 38 per cent feeling they were high but their career was short.

There was a vote of confidence too in the battle against hooligans: 88 per cent of fans do not feel hooliganism is on the way back and only 6 per

cent do. "Our annual survey plays an important role in helping us understand what supporters think of top-class football," said Peter Leaver, the chief executive of the Premier League. "It reflects our commitment to consult those who come through the turnstiles week in week out."

There was some cause for concern in the survey. Only 1 per cent of fans come from ethnic minorities despite attempts to rid the game of racism and provide a more welcoming atmosphere for minorities. Almost a quarter of fans had heard some incidence of black players being abused last season.

The survey also revealed a significant number of fans who would like to see the return of some standing space at football grounds, illegal in the Premier League as a result of the Taylor report into the Hillsborough disaster.

BBC 'dumbing down' coverage of Westminster

Kamel Ahmed
Media Correspondent

THE BBC came under fresh attack from Parliament yesterday as a House of Commons committee accused the corporation of dumbing down its coverage of Westminster.

In bad-tempered exchanges between MPs and senior BBC managers, Gerald Kaufman, Labour chairman of the committee, said of a series of programme changes that if the BBC "can't dumb their [parliamentary] coverage down, as they have with Radio 3", they would consign it to the "ghetto" of long wave.

"The changes will inevitably reduce the number of people who will have access to programmes that are distinct from the opinionated and soundbite offers we hear so often on the BBC," he said after questioning Matthew Bannister, managing director of BBC Radio, and Will Wyatt, head of broadcasting.

As well as changes to parliamentary programmes, the BBC is scrutinising its political output, including On the Record, Breakfast with Frost and Question Time.

Last night Sir Christopher Bland, the BBC chairman, refused Mr Kaufman's demand that the changes be delayed until after the committee reports in April as an infringement of the independence of BBC governors.

In the Commons last night Ann Taylor, Leader of the House, said Sir Christopher would attend Parliament next month to hear MPs' "very strong feelings" about rescheduling parliamentary programmes.

The shake-up of programmes from Westminster on both radio and television

was announced this week. The programme Yesterday in Parliament, which MPs listen to avidly in its present Radio 4 slot after the Today programme, will be moved to long wave, where it joins Today in Parliament, which was moved there in the early 1990s. Both programmes will be longer when the changes are introduced in April.

A Week in Westminster will move from its Saturday morning slot on Radio 4 to Thursday evenings. "It is ridiculous to have a review of the parliamentary week when the week has not even finished," Mr Kaufman said.

In Committee, a programme on select committee investigations, will be dumped in favour of a new hour-long programme on Sunday evenings.

Although no decisions have been made about On the Record or Question Time, changes to parliamentary coverage on television will begin in October.

The Midnight Hour discussion programme on BBC1, presented by Andrew Neil, will be scrapped, replaced by a new programme, Parliament Square.

The BBC claimed that the changes would save the amount of parliamentary programming. Mr Bannister said Yesterday in Parliament had lost 300,000 listeners in its present slot. Moving it to long wave would keep it available to those who wanted to "seek it out".

"We are trying to array the high-quality public service programmes of Radio 4 in a way that meets the needs of modern listeners," he said. "There is no question of any damage to the programming; indeed I believe you will see it enhanced."

Political scheduling

Parliamentary programmes

Yesterday in Parliament Weekday mornings, 8.45, Radio 4. Quarter of an hour romp through the main debates from the Commons and the Lords.

Future: Moves to long wave, given an extra 10 minutes.

Today in Parliament Weekday evenings, 11.30pm, Radio 4. Half-hour analysis of the day's events in Parliament. Has been broadcasting for more than 50 years.

Future: Stays on long wave, Friday programme given extra 15 minutes.

Westminster with Anne Mackenzie Three weekday afternoons, BBC2, 2.45pm. Flagship parliamentary television programme complete with coverage of select committees.

Future: No change

Midnight Hour Monday to Thursday, 12am, BBC2. Tired politicians sit around a table and talk with a

fish tank in the background. Future: Replaced by Parliament Square with a more "informal approach" to politics.

The Record Weekday mornings, 8.45am, BBC2. The previous day's events at parliament.

Future: Scrapped

Political programmes (All under review) Breakfast with Frost Sunday mornings, 8.30am. David Frost interviews major politician in plenty of time to catch the next day's headlines.

On the Record Sunday lunchtime, 12pm. John Humphrys gives politicians a pasting in a studio made to look as though they are sitting at the top of Big Ben.

Question Time Thursday evenings, 10.55pm. The public's chance to question ministers and MPs. David Dimbleby tries to stop them evading the issues.

The Guardian

The Guardian

available all over Europe

Yesterday



Communist Party in protest at the speech in Rome, and demanded an apology in the first of a series of protests. The party also held a demonstration in London.

Shadow Education Secretary Stephen Byers, Direct's education, "It is entirely clear that the Government's priority is not education, education, education, it is presentation, presentation, presentation."

Education Minister Lord Williams said it will be tomorrow when he turns 52. But today he got his cake in the shape of a giant 50p, to launch the Dash for 50p. Cash cheerfully

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Germans raid sex prisons

San Traynor in Berlin

A SEX slavery ring has been broken with the arrest of 16 men who allegedly smuggled dozens of young women from eastern Europe into Germany, subjecting them to beatings, torture and rape, north German police said yesterday.

The highly organised gang kept 24 women, most of whom are from Poland and Russia, under lock and key. Two of the women were shut in the dark for seven months.

The women, enticed into Germany by promises of jobs, were all forced to work as prostitutes after being sold to pimps for £1,000 each.

"It was an especially sadistic form of slavery," Hans-Joachim Spode, of the state criminal office in North-Rhine Westphalia, the highest of Germany's 16 states, said.

"The police are showing determination to pursue this modern slave trade."

Manfred Roesner, of the state prosecutor's office, denounced the slave trade as being an "enormous humiliation of the women".

Karin Lohmann, also of the prosecutor's office, said the victims were regularly raped and beaten brutally, and were

sold to gang members for DM 3,000 each. Hundreds of police raided brothels, flats, and asylum-seekers' homes in the Düsseldorf area on Wednesday night following an eight-month investigation.

The 16 men arrested included Germans, Turks, Italians and Albanians. Arrest warrants have been issued for a further six men.

Two dozen women, with an

Two kidnapped women were locked up in the dark for seven months

average age of 20, were discovered shut in various places and were freed. One policeman was arrested and two others are being investigated for colluding with the "slave-traders", allegedly having tipped off the suspects about the police raids in return for free sex with the women.

Mr Spode said he believed there were tens of thousands of east European women in Germany who had been coerced into prostitution

and that the raids had merely scratched the surface of a disturbing and growing vice problem.

In 1996, 400 women were "liberated" in North-Rhine Westphalia after being held captive and sold for sex.

The raids, involving special commando units, were the biggest police operation in the region for years.

Düsseldorf detectives were first alerted to the organised criminals last summer when a woman went to the police about her own kidnapping.

Another six furnished further evidence after the police raided a brothel.

Most of the victims are terrified of dealing with the police, however, because the alleged criminals have convinced them that they are liable to be sent to jail for prostitution.

They also fear deportation, as they are in the country illegally.

One young mother was tricked into coming to Germany to get medical treatment, but was kidnapped and later sold on to a brothel-keeper.

"We first have to convince the women that we are the good guys," Mr Roesner said.

The 16 arrested are expected to be charged with raping, kidnapping, and smuggling the women.



A policeman guards the high-security prison in Tirana after the riot in which four guards were taken hostage

PHOTOGRAPH: HECTOR PUSTINA

Papon did save Jews, wartime heroes testify

Paul Webster in Paris

THE chances of Maurice Papon being acquitted of war crimes against humanity have risen since resistance leaders or their children told a Bordeaux court that the former senior Vichy official worked for underground groups and warned them about Jewish round-ups.

Mr Papon, aged 87, who was responsible for Jewish affairs in the occupied Atlantic port, is accused of authorising the deportation of 1,560 men, women and children to their deaths in Germany.

But since the trial opened in October, arguments among the prosecution lawyers, evidence by historians and doubts whether he had the power to give orders to the French police have made the likelihood of conviction recede.

Mr Papon, who has conducted much of his own defence, despite poor health, listened with satisfaction as defence witnesses supported his claims to have helped Jewish families avoid arrest and provided important information to the resistance.

Some of the evidence came as a shock to the prosecution. A key element in the prosecution case is that Mr Papon, who later became Paris police chief and a Gaullist cabinet minister, was not a resistance member as he claims, even though De Gaulle promoted him after liberation.

Some defence witnesses wore wartime medals to impress the nine-member jury, but the most striking evidence was indirect. François

Tesseron, an industrialist who was aged 15 when the war ended, reported a conversation with his mother, Yvette Poitevin, who worked with a British-run underground group, Jade-Amicol.

"My mother was a nurse and guided Jewish children to safety after being asked by Mr Papon," he said, referring to claims by the former Vichy official that he had saved 300 lives. "In the same way, Papon warned the group of round-ups of Jewish families in 1942, 1943 and 1944."

Jean Jodel, a Jewish resistance fighter who belonged to the first network set up in 1940, said he hoped the trial would end with a cry of "Vive la France, vive Papon, vive la République".

Other witnesses said that Mr Papon had to work with a Nazi revolver at his head, and Jews would not have been saved even if he had resigned. Roger-Samuel Bloch, an agent for the underground group Marco-Kléber, submitted written testimony that Mr Papon had been recommended to him as a reliable ally by underground workers.

The three days of evidence by resistance leaders adds another element to a trial marked by doubt and confusion. Speculation on an acquittal has intensified since leading prosecution witnesses, who studied documents linking Mr Papon with deportations, said the papers were rubber-stamped file copies of decisions by more senior officials.

The trial was originally due to end on December 23, but a verdict does not seem likely before late March.

News in brief Bus bomb kills 10 in Algeria

A bomb killed at least 10 people and wounded 16 as it ripped through a bus in the Bouaichoune district south of Algiers on Thursday, security forces said.

It was the third bomb attack on public transport in Algeria this week and brought to around 30 the number of travellers killed. — Reuters.

A man spurned

A bearded woman and her female companion were shot to death in a karaoke bar in Portland, Oregon, by a man apparently upset that one of the women refused to leave with him, police said.

The women had been domestic partners for at least 10 years and both knew the suspect, said police. — AP.

Money launderer

A bank robber in Odense, Denmark, got away with 86,000 kroner (£7,600) in a bank raid, only to find it stained with red dye. Frustrated that almost all the loot bore the tell-tale dye, he went to a launderette and put the notes through a wash. They disintegrated — and stayed red. — AP.

Panda skins found

Police in China's central Hunan province have arrested five men suspected of killing two rare giant pandas. They found and confiscated the panda skins and five pelts of the endangered golden monkey. Killers of pandas and golden monkeys face the death penalty. — Reuters.

Embargo lifted

India has lifted a 10-year trade embargo on the Pacific island state of Fiji in an effort to rebuild bilateral relations, a commerce ministry spokeswoman said. India imposed the embargo in 1987 after a coup on the island. — AP.

Albanian prison rioters back down

Merita Dhimajoka in Tirana

A REVOLT in Tirana's high-security prison ended early yesterday after prisoners who destroyed cells

and took four guards hostage were given an ultimatum, a government official said.

Arian Hajdari, the Albanian deputy justice minister, said the inmates were given 10 minutes to restore order or face troops.

He declined to say whether the riot ended peacefully, only that the solution was negotiated "according to Western standards" and no one was hurt. The guards were unharmed.

The cause of the riot, which began on Wednesday, was not known, but Mr Hajdari confirmed that 22 prisoners held after rioting in Shkodër, where armed gangs caused an estimated \$1 million damage on Sunday and Monday, were involved.

Yeltsin ducks out of public showdown with cabinet

Tom Whitehouse in Moscow

BORIS Yeltsin threatened to dismiss three ministers during a government meeting on live television yesterday, but in further proof of the president's weakening concentration, left mysteriously just before his announcement was expected.

The cabinet, regional leaders and senior administration figures had gathered in the government's headquarters in Moscow to hear Mr Yeltsin call ministers to account for failing to ensure economic growth and pay state wages promptly in 1997.

Authorised leaks from the Kremlin had hinted the meeting as a day of reckoning and promised sackings. But Mr Yeltsin started with bluster and ended with an embarrassing retreat to the Kremlin.

"By the end of the session we may be short of three government members," he said to nervous laughter before calling the prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, to the podium to defend his record.

While Mr Chernomyrdin tried to deflect blame on to the economic crisis in Asia, Mr Yeltsin became distracted and started to cough. At the end of a subsequent speech he got up,

walked stiffly off the podium, and left.

Television cut its coverage and told viewers: "Transmission is interrupted because of technical reasons not connected to Russian TV." In other



Boris Yeltsin discusses the government's record yesterday before suddenly walking out of the meeting

words, it was told to stop broadcasting.

The Moscow stock exchange fell on news of Mr Yeltsin's disappearance, but recovered when he emerged to greet his Ukrainian counterpart, Leonid Kuchma, in the Kremlin.

A change of mood rather than another health scare was the apparent reason

for the president's behaviour, and a Kremlin spokesman said cabinet changes could come today.

Last week Mr Yeltsin threatened to appoint a new government unless improvements were quickly achieved, but his room for manoeuvre is limited. Sacking the deputy prime ministers, Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov — the so-called young reformers — would anger the International Monetary Fund, whose loans ensure the ruble's stability.

Mr Chernomyrdin, who has been prime minister for five years, is popular with the oil and gas lobby, the regions and parliament, and could not be dismissed without causing a political crisis.

Sacking unimportant ministers is unlikely to bring substantial changes in policy or distract attention from Mr Yeltsin's failure to reverse the decline in living standards of most Russians.

A Russian paratroop major was formally charged yesterday with the October 1994 bomb murder of journalist Dmitry Khoklov, aged 27, who had been investigating army corruption. A retired colonel who headed paratroop intelligence has already been charged with the offence. — AP.

'Cancer cure' in abeyance

John Hooper in Rome

THE hopes of tens of thousands of cancer patients are riding on the outcome of a stand-off between the Italian government and an elderly doctor who claims to have discovered a "miracle cure".

The house of Professor Luigi Di Bella in the north-eastern town of Modena has been surrounded this week by desperate patients, including a woman in an ambulance, since he let it be known that he was not writing any more prescriptions for his cure.

The professor, aged 85, was protesting at the terms of a government decree setting out the arrangements for an evaluation of his method.

Other cancer specialists accused him of trying to dodge a proper scientific assessment. But their objections appear to have made little impact on public support for the professor: a poll released yesterday found 86 per cent of those surveyed believed in what he said.

Such popular support has made the dispute a political issue. The far-right National Alliance, in particular, has taken up calls for the decree to be repealed.

A cancer support group is threatening a demonstration in Rome next week if the decree is not withdrawn.

Prof Di Bella's supporters claim that the "cocktail" of drugs he has developed can block the development of several forms of cancer, especially in the early stages.

His cure had been shunned and even ridiculed by the authorities and the medical establishment, but since a lower court judge began giving permission for it to be administered free of charge last year the professor and his supporters — riding on a tide of impassioned, and in some cases perhaps irrational, feeling — have forced the government to agree to tests and to subsidise the high cost of the key element in the "cocktail".

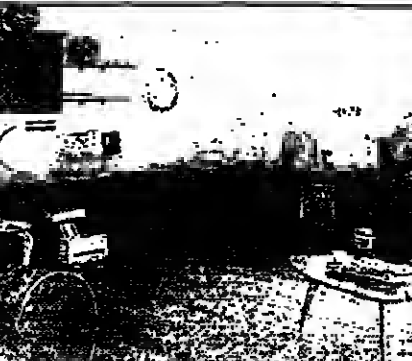
Under Italian law, the treatment will only be made available to dying patients — those the professor says are least likely to respond. That aspect of the decree is to be looked at by the constitutional court on the grounds that it discriminates against non-terminal patients and may violate a provision of the Italian Republic's founding charter.

Prof Di Bella's complaint is against the conditions under which his treatment may be prescribed while it is being tested. These include a written statement by the doctor that there is no proof of its efficacy. "It is an insult — and above all, an insult to the doctor," said the professor's son, Adolfo Di Bella. "You know what this is? It is terrorism — medical terrorism."

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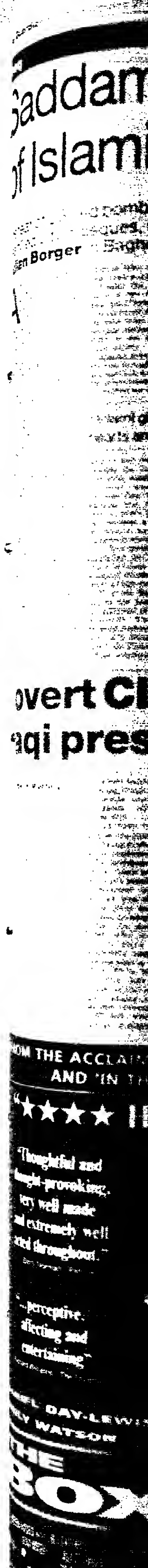
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Iraq

Saddam rides the tiger of Islamic devotion

The fear of US-led bombing raids has filled city mosques, reports Julian Borger in Baghdad

AHMED Yassem woke his wife, mother and child before dawn and piled them into a taxi for a three-hour journey to Baghdad, paying the equivalent of four months' wages so that they could spend the day at the Sheikh Abdul Kader Mosque to thank Allah for sending Kofi Annan to Iraq. During the United Nations secretary-general's visit, the Baghdad mosques were filled with pious, desperate Iraqis thanking God for offering the prospect of peace and praying for an end to sanctions.

Mr Yassem, a school teacher from the southern city of Anbara, said: "Allah is the only one who can lift sanctions. We trust in Allah and in President Saddam Hussein to solve our problems."

Allah and President Saddam are frequently mentioned in the same breath these days. Mosque attendants wear Saddam badges on their robes, and bugs portraits of the Iraqi leader praying are found at every turn, setting an example to clerics and the faithful alike.

On an abandoned, bomb-scarred airfield on the other side of Baghdad, work has started on what is supposed to be the world's largest mosque, with room for 45,000 worshippers. The mosque, to be named after President Saddam, will rise from a huge artificial lake in the shape of the Arab world.

Under the relentless pressure of two decades of wars and sanctions, Iraq is being transformed from one of the most secular nations in the Middle East to an increasingly devout society. Almost every successive crisis has brought a corresponding lurch towards religion, as the government has struggled to counteract domestic unpopularity and regional isolation.

During the Gulf war the inscription *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) was added to the national flag. Two years later, the alcohol was banned. In the past 10 years the *abaya* (veil) has become a common sight on Iraq's formerly fashion-conscious women.

A European diplomat in Baghdad believes the embrace of Islam has so far paid political dividends, but represents a high-risk strategy.

"It gives Saddam a direct line to the hearts and minds of millions of Iraqis in the mosques. They are never without Saddam. But religion is a very dangerous tiger to ride," the diplomat said.

The emphasis on religion mosques to reassert control. The suppression of the Shi'ite revolt fragmented the vestiges of organised opposition, but left the south a lawless region infested with army deserters and bandits.

The government controls the main roads by day — not necessarily by night. We are always told to stay off them after dusk," said a UN official who travels frequently to the southern cities of Basra, Nasiriyah and Najaf.

The greatest fear of some Sunnis in Baghdad last week was that United States and British bombing would unleash a new Shi'ite revolt.

"I know people who are collecting arms in their houses to protect themselves, not against the Americans who can't be touched, but against the Shi'ites," one Sunni said.

The ranks of the devout at Sheikh Abdul Kader, the capital's main Sunni mosque, may have increased, but the number of Shi'ites at the Khadimiya main Shi'ite mosque has exploded.

On a working morning this week the huge blue and gold mosque was packed. Sayeed Abbas Hadi, the curator of the 500-year-old mosque, bristled at the suggestion that the Shi'ite branch of Iraqi Islam was, perhaps, growing faster than its Sunni counterpart.

"America and Britain tried to split Iraq during the Gulf war. But they will not be divided. They have a great deal of love in their hearts for Saddam Hussein," he said.

In the courtyard outside the government-appointed cleric's reception room, the guardians of that love were everywhere — young men in inconspicuously dark clothes stood among the impoverished milling crowd, casually dispersing small groups of worshippers.

There are carrots also for the Shi'ites. Sayeed Abbas Hadi said: "All sponsorship comes from the government, especially from President Saddam Hussein. He is — as you are aware — one of the descendants of Ali."

All, the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law, is revered by the Shi'ites. That a northern Sunni leading an avowedly secular party should have discovered such a direct link appeared to be a perfectly understandable coincidence in the venerable holy man.

'[Islam] gives Saddam a direct line to the hearts and minds of millions of Iraqis'

During the Gulf war the inscription *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) was added to the national flag. Two years later, the alcohol was banned. In the past 10 years the *abaya* (veil) has become a common sight on Iraq's formerly fashion-conscious women.

A European diplomat in Baghdad believes the embrace of Islam has so far paid political dividends, but represents a high-risk strategy.

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Iraqi Muslims pray at the Sheikh Abdul Kader Mosque in Baghdad during the weapons-inspection crisis, asking God to protect them against a possible US attack. The mosques were full during the crisis. PHOTOGRAPH: KAHIM SAHBI

Covert CIA plan to topple Iraqi president leaked

Martin Kettle in Washington

SENIOR advisers are warning President Clinton against adopting a new CIA covert action plan to topple the Iraqi president, the New York Times newspaper claims.

The plan, said to have been "months in the making", involves operations costing tens of millions of dollars, aimed at enlisting Kurdish and Shi'ite agents to destroy or damage economic and political targets in Iraq, the newspaper reported.

This programme of sabotage and subversion would be backed by increased propaganda campaigns aimed at the Iraqi population, including a "Radio Free Iraq" modelled on cold war broadcasts to Eastern Europe.

The aim is to undermine President Saddam Hussein by showing Iraqis that he is not invincible and to strengthen opponents' efforts to overthrow him.

President Clinton must approve the plan, apparently still being drafted, before they can be implemented.

The newspaper reports that key advisers are sceptical of the plan's possible success. It is assumed in Washington that the leak of some details to the press was designed to hamper its adoption.

The CIA director, George Tenet, who is among those said to have doubts, has apparently told Mr Clinton that the plan is "risky".

The White House national security adviser, Sandy Berger, is also sceptical of the CIA's ability to orchestrate Saddam's overthrow.

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CIA chief George Tenet says the plan is 'risky'

sabotage", say the operation, if approved, would be one of the largest and most ambitious pieces of CIA covert action since the cold war.

The CIA has given financial and other backing to opponents of the Iraqi regime, in-

cluding Kurdish groups in northern Iraq, southern Shi'ites, Iraqi exile organisations in Europe and defectors in Jordan, since the Gulf war.

President Saddam's forces overran one such CIA campaign in northern Iraq in 1996. The Iraqi opposition, which remains divided and ineffective, is thought to be incapable of mounting the kind of guerrilla campaigns envisaged.

The revelation that such plans are being actively considered comes as many of Mr Clinton's Republican political opponents urge the administration to commit itself more emphatically to the overthrow of President Saddam.

Some Republicans are also pressing the White House to target President Saddam, even though assassination of foreign political leaders was outlawed by the US Congress 20 years ago.

UN chief rounds on the doubters

Mark Tran in New York and Ian Black in London

KOFI Annan, the United Nations secretary-general, firmly defended his weapons inspections agreement with Saddam Hussein as bagging began yesterday over a British effort to ensure the success of the deal.

Mr Annan delivered a short, sharp rebuke to his detractors, including the United States Senate

Republican leader Trent Lott, who asked why the US should place its trust in "someone devoted to building a human relationship with a mass murderer".

In a message to his staff, Mr Annan said it was "not unexpected that there would be some criticism", and noted that the Security Council, rather than "a few critics", would have the last word on the deal.

He also announced the appointment of Jayantha Dhanapala Lanka as com-

missioner of the group of inspectors and diplomats that will inspect Iraq's eight controversial "presidential sites". A Sri Lankan, he was made UN undersecretary-general for disarmament last month.

As Mr Annan spoke, Britain and the US were warning Baghdad of the "severe consequences" if it violates the agreement.

But a British Security Council resolution also offers Iraq incentives to co-operate. The draft does not

threaten the use of force, in the face of objections from Russia, China and France.

A senior British official said: "The issue of automaticity doesn't arise. We want to state a political fact — that if there is a violation serious consequences will follow. We're not attempting to define what that would be."

But another diplomat said the message to Iraq was clear. "If you guys step out of line, don't expect a letter on an ocean liner taking three weeks to get to you."

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Pleas to stop 'butcher of Beijing'

Andrew Higgins
in Hong Kong

DEMOCRACY activists in Hong Kong protested outside the headquarters of the underground Communist Party in the former British colony yesterday against the expected appointment as head of China's parliament of the "butcher of Beijing".

The protest outside the Xinhua News Agency near the Happy Valley race track added to a small but growing campaign of dissent by appeals and petitions on the Chinese mainland against Li Peng, who, after 10 years as prime minister, is due to become chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) when it convenes next week.

In Beijing, the Communist Party central committee began a private meeting to fix the script for this year's session of the NPC, a rubber stamp legislature which meets once a year to endorse shifts of policy and personnel decided secretly by the party.

The small protest rally was organised by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, set up during the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square and still active, despite the British colony's return to China and its alleged "subversive" role in mainland propaganda.

Mr Li, who will remain number two in China's political hierarchy after the party leader, Jiang Zemin, signed a

1989 decree imposing martial law in Beijing to suppress student protesters encamped in Tiananmen, and applauded the June 4 massacre. His place as prime minister is expected to be taken by Zhu Rongji, a no-nonsense economic strategist untainted by the 1989 bloodshed.

Lau Chin-shek, a Hong Kong trade unionist and leader of the Democratic Alliance, said: "Li Peng must bear responsibility for June 4. We want the NPC to investigate what happened in 1989 and to rehabilitate the stu-

'Li Peng must be responsible for Tiananmen. We want the NPC to investigate'

dent movement. This will never happen with him as its chairman."

A Hong Kong human rights organisation reported yesterday that a dissident physician, Lin Xinsu, had been placed under house arrest in the coastal city of Fuzhou, apparently in retaliation for his open letter calling on the NPC to reject Mr Li as chairman.

A similar appeal has been made by Ding Zilin, the mother of a teenage boy shot dead by the People's Liberation Army while he cowered in a subway as it advanced into Tiananmen Square.

China's constitution de-

fines the NPC as the "highest organ of state power", a status that means little in reality but which has made it a focus for the aspirations of democracy activists.

The appointment of Mr Li to lead the legislature douses these embers of hope. Hong Kong will send 36 delegates to next week's meeting, all of them pro-China stalwarts. They include Jiang Enzhu, the head of Xinhua. He received the most "votes" to represent Hong Kong, despite having only just moved to the territory.

The NPC played a significant but ultimately fruitless role in the political manoeuvring that preceded the 1989 massacre. Several key members of its standing committee backed the students and opposed force.

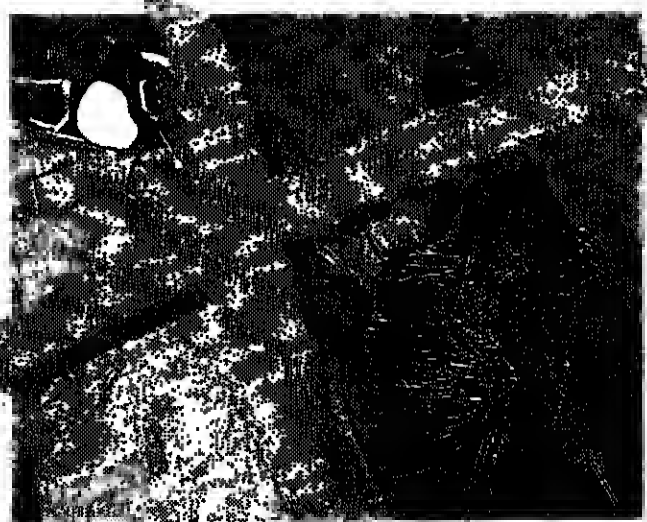
Li Peng and other champions of a military solution stifled their opposition by pressuring Wan Li, the NPC's then chairman, as he flew back from North America. His plane was diverted from Beijing to Shanghai, where he was held in a state guesthouse until he agreed to issue a statement endorsing martial law.

Western governments, transfixed by China's huge market and its permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council, have been eager to forget Tiananmen.

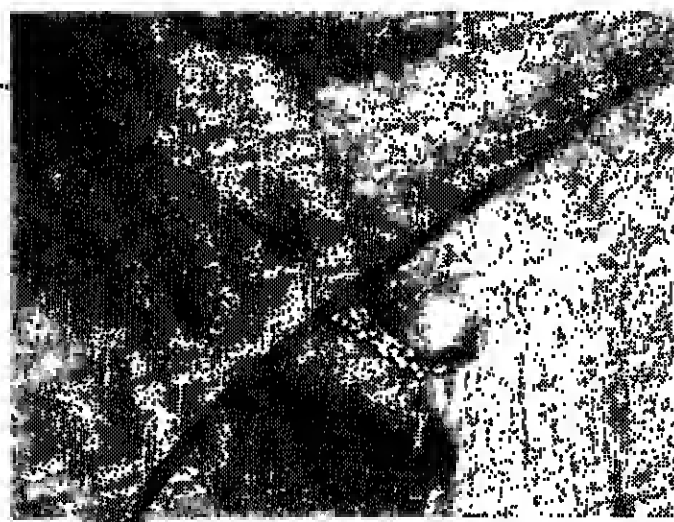
For the first time in years, the European Union said this week that it would not sponsor a motion criticising China's human rights record at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva next month.



Tibetan monks pass a Chinese policeman in the Yong He Gong temple in Beijing yesterday during celebrations for the Tibetan New Year tomorrow



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Scruffs and car alarms in front line of Rudy's civil war

Ed Vulliamy in New York

MAYOR Rudolph Giuliani's crusade for a sweeter Big Apple has become a serious PR challenge after a speech this week in which he fine-tuned his clamping down on anti-social behaviour into an instruction to New Yorkers to become "neat, quiet and polite".

This order to a people who are by tradition scruffy, noisy and rude came as part of the latest package of reforms in what is dubbed Rudy's civil war. His crusade to transform the city began in his first term with such broad-brush considerations as breaking Cosa Nostra, decreasing the murder rate and making the subway safe.

The second term has been concerned with local detail, and earlier this week Mr Giuliani began his war on

the sex shops and topless bars of Manhattan.

Another recent clamp-down was on jaywalkers — those who ignore the "Don't Walk" light at pedestrian crossings. This wheeze has been largely successful, striking the fear of a fine into those who try their luck against the traffic. The downside is that already boisterous motorists are taking full advantage of the right to hoot and speed at wayward pedestrians.

Then came Mr Giuliani's speech this week to 150 community leaders, in which he laid down the following commandments:

- In response to the jaywalking clamour, motorists face a "zero tolerance" campaign, with immediate arrest and fines for those driving faster than 30mph.
- There will be an increase in taxi ranks to stamp out the New York tradition of cabbies "cutting over three

lanes of traffic in order to get a fare".

- A dress code will require teachers to be "smart and presentable". Civic classes — a mainstay of American education in the 1950s — will return to teach Giulianiism to children.
- Anyone "who drops as much as a gum wrapper" will face the wrath of anti-litter enforcers.
- Neighbourhood "noise sweeps" will be aimed particularly at car alarms, owners facing arrest if the din continues for longer than three minutes.

Mr Giuliani promises a zero-tolerance day soon when, without warning, the above will all be suddenly and ruthlessly enforced. The citizens of New York, says their mayor, need to "slow up, down, quiet up, and always remember to say thank you".

It's like asking his Italian ancestors not to eat pasta.

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Mr Murdoch
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The little child with a big kick

From the Californian floods to the Indonesian fires, the disastrous weather changes caused by El Niño are giving governments a big headache. Especially as the impact is piecemeal but the cumulative effect is global. By **John Vidal**

THE Peruvian coastal town of Ica, several hundred kilometres south of Lima, was hit by massive floods twice in a week at the end of January. The first tidal wave came down off the mountains and deserts. It ripped through the streets and washed away a shanty town. Six days later, as thousands of people were recovering, another wall of water rushed into Ica. The place is now covered in silt, and people are suffering respiratory diseases as the land returns to its normal desert-like state. Displaced people are living in temporary shelters in the desert. The army has set up standpipes. The president of Peru has made much political capital out of the rescue efforts.

But in Peru Ica is just one of hundreds of towns and communities to have suffered devastating storms and floods. The fishing fleets have been laid up for months now, and many farmers have lost everything. The story is repeated throughout Latin America, East Africa, Southeast Asia and Australia, as the freak weather caused by the mysterious oceanographic condition known popularly as El Niño takes effect globally.

The toll is rising as the current El Niño pattern — the 13th since 1890 — begins to peak. Four thousand people are already believed to have died in freak floods, droughts and storms. Many millions are suffering disease, the permanent devastation of their livelihoods, or lingering malnutrition.

There are outbreaks of cholera and typhoid. The United Nations reports new diseases emerging and malaria spreading into areas once thought immune. In East Africa, where 27 million people are estimated to be at risk of malnutrition after crop failures and floods, hundreds of thousands of people are homeless. Water and sanitation systems have collapsed. The UN is asking governments to contribute 600,000 tons of food immediately and is preparing for a larger appeal later.

It is not floods but drought that has gripped South-east Asia for up to 14 months now. The worst conditions are thought to be in Papua New

Guinea, where the Australian government believes that 80,000 people are in serious risk of dying if conditions do not improve. Some of the remotest tribespeople on Earth are suffering from flash fires and frost, with reports of hundreds of deaths and widespread malnutrition. Millions of people in Indonesia and the Philippines and Malaysia are suffering the effects of failed crops.

El Niño occurs when the easterly winds die down, allowing warmer waters normally kept inside the western Pacific to drift eastwards. The term — from the Spanish for "the Christ child", as in South America it tends to occur during the Christmas season — now refers to the complex of sea-temperature changes in the Pacific Ocean and the global weather disruption that results. The process has been recorded since 1897, and tends to recur every few years.

This El Niño "event", as climatologists describe a recurrence, is thought to be less severe than the last big one in 1982-3, although the effects on people have been far greater. Then, the economic impact ranged from \$300 million caused by floods in Bolivia, and \$200 million from hurricanes in Hawaii, to \$600 million resulting from drought and fires in Mexico. Rough figures suggest that 1982-83 cost, at today's prices, \$10 to \$12 billion. Yet that figure has already been passed several times over in the past six months.

Yet the current El Niño was the most expected disaster in history. Since last summer, meteorologists, agencies and non-governmental organisations in developing countries have been warning government leaders what would happen and begging for the simple resources to prepare for the worst. In the West, led by California, projections of massive rainfall were so great that a number of senior meteorologists dismissed them as hype. The arguments themselves, which some saw as the self-obsessed worries of rich Americans, may have helped to undermine global preparedness. Governments by and large ignored the warnings. But now that El Niño is gripping, and the bodies and the costs can be counted, world leaders are wringing their hands and blaming it for a vast range of problems. Any crop failure, landslide, flood, illness,

hunger or woe in the land is being used to cover up and excuse policy failures, bad investments and long-term disregard of the poorest.

Blaming El Niño is now a sport of the authorities, nowhere more so than in Indonesia. Here, businesses, with the backing of President Suharto, have used the drought as an opportunity to burn off land for massive development projects. The choking smoke brought misery for millions and now, after a short break, the fires are returning.

Elsewhere, presidents and prime ministers have been promising to help their citizens to overcome the natural enemy. Yet El Niño is as much a man-made disaster as a natural one. Natural disasters always hurt the poorest hardest and, true to form, El Niño has remarkably concentrated its power on the some of the world's most precious communities. These live on a knife-edge between absolute poverty and season-to-season survival.

ONE reason that El Niño seems so much more severe this year is that the world population has grown by more than one billion. Shanty towns have sprung up on insecure land: the poor cannot afford weather-resistant housing. When the storms, drought or floods come, they are the first to suffer.

Another is that communities' traditional methods of coping with quite normal extremes of climate have been systematically undermined in the past two decades. Most of the poorest countries have had little option but to embrace the global economy and to rely increasingly for their basics on the outside world. This has brought these countries some wealth, but that has rarely percolated down to the poorest. Additionally policies promoting self-sufficiency and food security in communities have been replaced by a new dependency on the outside world. This works well — until roads and bridges bringing in vital supplies are suddenly swept away in floods, or harvests fail and markets collapse.

El Niño may mark a new style of recurring, widespread regional emergency, rather than a massive localised attack

An ill wind



United States
California tends to be the worst hit during the 1982-3 El Niño. It sustained \$1 billion of property damage. Torrential rain (three times the norm) and fatal landslides have already hit this year.



Indonesia
It has experienced its worst drought in 50 years. Dry conditions caused hundreds of forest fires. These created a cloud of smoke half the size of North America.



Kenya
Africa has been hit by a combination of drought and El Niño. It has lost 10% of its livestock. Drought has also hit the coffee and tea sectors.



Peru
Floods have hit the coastal region. In the north, the Pacific has been hit by a series of storms, leading to a loss of crops and livestock.

on a country's resources. It leaves the UN, governments, humanitarian agencies and non-governmental development groups in a quandary over how to respond. El Niño is emerging not as one disaster but hundreds of small, unpredictable ones. Micro-climates that result can mean floods on one side of a hill and drought on the other. They can lead to small events that are devastating for small numbers, but do not seem to warrant a massive mobilisation of

resources. The western humanitarian groups are finding it hard to tell precisely who needs what and where. The consequences of El Niño are on a far broader scale than, say, those of a famine or large-scale flood, and because so much is below the antennae of the press, it has been difficult to get a fix on what is happening. Trained to parachute in to large-scale tragedies, pick up the pieces and to get out quickly, the agencies and themselves semi-paralysed.

The most successful are staying at home and sending money or resources in the affected countries to partner organisations. Nevertheless, the humanitarian response to El Niño has brought some traditionally warring organisations together. Western groups mostly work on their own and, jealously guard their own projects, but those trying to respond are now being forced to share information and resources.

The current El Niño has at least three or four more months to run, but it will take many devastated communities years to recover their livelihoods. The need now is for planning and development that encourages long-term self-reliance. There may be little time to lose.

Sources: (1) UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction conference, September-October 1997. Graphics sources: The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (<http://www.cgo.noaa.gov/anso/>); Weather World 2010 Project, University of Illinois (<http://www2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/>); PBS Online (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ell-nino/anso/>); UN World Meteorological Organisation (<http://www.cvn.org/ell-nino/>); Environmental News Network. Graphics: Paddy Allen; Steve Villiers; Researcher Matt Keating. John Vidal is the Guardian's environment editor.

El Niño is a natural phenomenon which occurs in the equatorial Pacific Ocean. The last time El Niño caused serious problems was in 1982-3, when it was blamed for nearly 2,000 deaths and damages estimated at \$10-15 billion. But more people may suffer this time.



An old enemy



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Comment

Diary

Matthew Norman

AFTER the Foreign Secretary hinted at an unclear retaliation against Iraq last week, a journalist set about double checking that he was once a member of CND. "I couldn't say," said his press secretary, warily. "You'll have to ring the Foreign Office." "We don't know," said a press officer there. "Ring one of his advisors." "What," asked the adviser, nervously, "is the point of asking about that?" At CND HQ, he was told: "We're not allowed to answer that question. It's a matter of privacy." ... and at Scottish CND, the mystery deepened. Although describing Cook as "an absolute inspiration to us all at one time," they could not confirm it. "Erza, we don't have the files. Not for Robin Cook." A missing file? "Well, we don't know where ... I'll tell you what, talk to a friend who was at the big rally in Glasgow in 1985." "George Square. Jeez, aye," said the friend. "Rolling in the dirt with the rest of us, he was, right next to my pal Eddie. But I couldn't say if he was a paid up member." And there it ends. When it comes to secrecy, the Freemasons have little to teach former members of CND.

THE Labour Party Scottish Conference is held in Perth next week, and the brochure is magnificent. The picture of Sean Connery, grinning beside Gordon Brown as they sail merrily down the River Forth, is a particular joy.

INDEPENDENT editor-in-chief Rizia Rose Boycott, the doyenne of do-it-yourself marketing brain-wave, Little packs are being sent out to potential readers containing vouchers offering 50 per cent off the Sunday title through March and April. Also in the pack are postcards advertising various sections. One has the word "balls" plastered many times over it; another has a picture of a plug hole, with the plug removed. ... a ferociously audacious piece of imagery from a newspaper group in such deep trouble. As for the vouchers, it is Rosie, you may recall, who is in a fearful hate with the Guardian over what she describes, amusingly, as "predatory pricing." For God's sake, Rosie, take more tobacco with it.

THE British Picture Editor's annual awards were held on Tuesday, and one man must have had a good night. On page 14 of yesterday's Times was news of a posthumous Grammy awarded to Paul Robeson, and above it — captioned "Robeson: victim of the McCarthy era" — was a photo of Douglas Hurd. My colleague Simon Bowers rang Julia Brown, his secretary, to invite him to sing at a charity concert we are thinking of holding for the victims of Serbian oppression. "Ha ha ha ha. Oh, I'm sure I'm not supposed to laugh," said Julia. "I'll put it to him, and get back to you." The song we have in mind for him is Ol' Man River. "He must know sumpin', but don't say nothing! He just keep rollin' along" ... somehow, the lyric seems uncannily well suited to Lord Hurd's brand of international diplomacy.

IAM struck dumb with amazement by the verdict in the horse racing libel case at the High Court — a case which turned on the crucial testimony of my old friend Derek Thompson of Channel 4 Racing. Perhaps unaware of his runner-up spot to Diary pundit Stephen, the West Highland terrier, in the Great Tipster Stakes of 1995, the jury did not find TV's Thommo (49) a credible witness. I am too distressed to go on now, but have a feeling we may return to this next week, when the initial shock has worn off.

YOU GOT TWO CHOICES, CHINESE OR PUSH OFF!
HARPER COLLINS CANTEN




As islands go, Princess Margaret's Mustique is a real disgrace

Decca Aitkenhead



THERE'S nothing like speaking ill of the ill to really cause offence. Speaking ill of the dead is an altogether different matter. Almost 40 years ago, a Scottish aristocrat "adventurer" called Colin Tennant came across the tiny island of Mustique, just south of St Vincent. He took a fancy to it, bought it, and had the bright idea of giving the first plot of land to Princess Margaret as a wedding present. A stupendous house was duly built, more villas followed, and by the mid-1960s Mustique had acquired a reputation as an exotic hideaway where the aristocracy and their celebrity playmates got up to all sorts of whispered adventures under torchlight on the golden shores.

Locals from neighbouring islands were shipped in to skivvy. They were housed in shacks, denied residency rights, and pregnant maids were shipped off to give birth elsewhere, just to make sure Tennant's personal fiefdom stood unchallenged.

Today, Mustique is owned by the Mustique Company — a kind of co-operative of the 70 or so white individuals who own houses on the island, and rent them out to those wealthy enough to afford the \$15,000 a week. I once went there to interview a resident. It is a splendid spot to spend a week. Guests potter about, play tennis, drink cocktails and enjoy the rare opportunity to come across celebrities who might be even more famous than themselves. Best of all, the staff are charming.

There's none of that surly, grudging business — hell, no, the servants who staff your villa and mow your lawns and rake your beach act like their entire lives depend on making you feel like a princess. How lucky they must be to live in paradise, and how happy they look!

They have a good reason to make sure they look happy. If they're surly, or slack, they get the sack — and then they get put on a boat back to the island they came from, where they'll struggle to earn a dollar an hour because the banana trade is collapsing, and Britain, having given its old

congratulated for creating. One where the children of the 30 or so domestic staff attend a school paid for by the homeowners (trustee: Mick Jagger), but are reluctant to go home after school because they will be locked in the kitchen if the guests that week don't like kids. "Paradise?" shrugs the school teacher. "I tell the kids it's a fool's paradise. They have nowhere to play, no family, their parents are slaving all hours to serve the guests, and if they do anything wrong they are banished from their island. It should be their home, and they owe their rights here to a respectful smile."

Mustique falls under the jurisdiction of St Vincent, which grants the island autonomy over its civic affairs so long as the Mustique Company provides its workers various amenities. "We have a real moral obligation to the workers," says its managing director. So the blacks have a basketball pitch, bunk houses to live in, and are allowed to have babies. Basically, St Vincent lets Mustique run things as it likes, because it attracts rich people.

St Vincent received full independence from Britain in 1979. The apartheid on Mustique was set up while St Vincent was still part of the British empire. Princess Margaret is not the only Briton to be implicated in the odious arrangement: about 30 per cent of homeowners are British. As metaphors for our royal traditions go, Mustique is about as shabby as it gets.

So this is the Mustique Princess Margaret must be

colonies their "independence", has been less than impressive in helping the islands find their way in the world. The homeowners of Mustique know all about these problems — which is why they're so very proud of themselves for offering employment on Mustique. People on other islands would give their right arm to work here. One homeowner told me, "Any maid silly enough to lose her job is just plain mad."

So this is the Mustique Princess Margaret must be

The apartheid there was set up while it was still part of the British empire

arouses among people who don't read his papers. He is not, of course, a fellow traveller. Mr Murdoch is no more an Edgar Snow than Mr Patten. He is a businessman.

Three years ago, Murdoch landed himself in Beijing's dog house with a robust speech warning that satellite television would help undermine "totalitarian regimes everywhere". China responded by issuing State Council Directive No 129: it banned the reception of unauthorised foreign broadcasts and put tight limits on satellite dishes.

Mr Murdoch quickly got the message. He pulled the BBC from his Hong Kong-based Star Television service to please China. The BBC had, among other things, produced an unfattering documentary portraying Mao as a green-teethed, philandering paranoiac. Nowadays, pap is churned out by Murdoch's sanitised, China-friendly satellite channel. Murdoch's rehabilitation is now complete. His Mandarin-language Phoenix TV, a spin-off from Star, is currently signing deals with cable-TV operators in Chi-

na's richest province, Guangdong. His gunships included a free trip to London for the editors of the People's Daily and return visits to Beijing by chiefs of the NewsCorp empire. Particularly instructive was a journey to Beijing from London by Peter Stothard, the editor of the Times, another Mur-

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This stripped away the pretence of news gathering and exposed the trip for

Goddess of Grammar

Bill Buford



IAM an editor at the New Yorker, and like many members of its staff I feel compelled to reveal the workings of a legendary colleague, the magazine's official grammarian, the 83-year old Miss Gould — dead, affectionately barking, peanut-butter eating, and obsessed with sentences — and the five errors of grammatical usage that, after suffering three years of Miss Gould's brutal scrutiny, I now know that I've already made even before I reach the end of this sentence. Or should I say "which I've already made before I've reached the end of this sentence." Or should it be "that sentence."

Actually, while I, happy to own up to my five errors of grammatical usage, am suddenly not sure that there are only (or should it be technically, "there is only") five errors. In fact, the question occurs to me, now panicking, I admit, slightly: why am I so confident that Miss Gould, the Goddess of Grammar as she is known in this corner of the world, would only pick up five errors? (Oh, hell, should that be "pick up only five errors?") Why couldn't there be six errors? Or seven? Or, horror or horrors: is it possible that, if I subjected that sentence (one does say "that" there, doesn't one?) to Miss Gould's excruciating examination (can one say "excruciating" like that?) that she would be unable to find anything in it (that sentence, I mean) that was correct (or, is it "which was correct"? Or should it be in the present — "which is correct"? — tense?)

THE essential tool of the official grammarian is the proof — the Eleanor Gould proof, a column of text reproduced on a large sheet of paper and covered, in Miss Gould's distinctive spidery handwriting, with "suggested" corrections. Implicit in an analysis of a Gould proof is the perfectly straightforward question: what do editors do? When I arrived at the New Yorker, I discovered how little I knew.

I had written a short piece it, rewrote it again, gave it to another editor, who struggled with it and told me to rewrite it, looked it again, told me to rewrite it again, and then, the thing completed, gave it to Miss Gould so she could cast her eye over it. What I got back is a marvel to look at. Each page is covered with queries, as many as 100 on a page. A page has only 330 words: that's a query for every three

words. There was all the usual stuff — sloppiness and the little delicacies of fiction, and instructions about where the commas should be. But there were also lectures about grammar and logic, and invocations of rules I'd never heard of.

Eleanor Gould joined the New Yorker in 1945. She was 28. That was the New Yorker edited by Mr Ross (that was also the time when no one was referred to by his first name). In Mr Ross's day, Miss Gould revealed recently, you were not allowed to mention deodorant or perspiration: such were the strictures of decorum (Americans, you know — such a polite race).

Miss Gould then worked for Mr Ross's successor, Mr Shawn, and Mr Shawn's successor, Mr Gottlieb. In 1990, in conversation with Mr Gottlieb, Miss Gould noticed with some alarm that she could see that his lips were moving but that there was no sound. She was rushed off to hospital, tests were conducted (during her stay, she continued going over proofs — Eleanor Gould has marked up every piece of non-fiction published in the last 52 years), but her hearing never returned. Miss Gould now works for Mr Gottlieb's successor (we just call her Tina), and we communicate by notes. Once, with Miss Gould sitting by my side, I scrawled a query on her proof — some-

She has marked up every piece of non-fiction published in the last 52 years

thing like, are you sure the punctuation of a non-restrictive clause is appropriate with this relative pronoun? I was showing off. And she looked at me ferociously and then wrote — on a notepad — that one must never write anything extraneous on a proof. What was wrong with me?

Recently I gathered Gould proofs together (a Gould proof has a sacred quality and is buried deep in the New Yorker archive once its function is completed). They are curious things to read calmly — without the pressure of a weekly closing. How stupid we all are, it makes you think. How could someone have missed that agreement? Of course those metaphors don't match. How could the writer — and his editor — not see that four sentences weren't needed, that four words got the thought out?

I began in the confidence that I could identify the mistakes of logic and indirection sentence. But alas, I now see there are too many. That the list itself could take up this entire column.

More than meets the eye in Murdoch's fight with Chris Patten?

Riling Rupert

Andrew Higgins

IN HIS last days in Hong Kong's Government House, where no one lives any more, the last governor took delight in signing autographs. I have an embossed invitation adorned with his cheeky handwritten code: "Chris Patten, the Last Oppressor".

From almost the moment he stepped on to the tarmac at Kai Tak Airport in 1992 until last July when British rule sailed out of Victoria Harbour aboard the Britannia, Mr Patten never vanished his views.

He shouted his antipathy towards those in Beijing he mocked as the "comrades", "old men" and, in a more earthy moment with his biographer Jonathan Dimbleby, "wankers". He predicted that their days were numbered.

China responded in kind. It called him a "criminal of a thousand antiquities", a "serpent", "a whore" and — the experts are still trying to decipher this one — a "tango dancer".

The scribbles of Love My China, a polemical pamphlet published in Manchuria, suggested that the then British prime minister screw up his courage and "dump a bucket of shit over Patten's head".

So it is hardly news that Mr Patten does not like China's leaders terribly much. But wait. We are now told that the world's most powerful news-merchant has been caught off guard.

Robert Murdoch, it is said, has just woken up to the fact that Mr Patten is not China's favourite "foreign friend", that he is not another Edgar Snow, the US writer who adored Mao and, after a 1950s visit to China at the height of the great famine, announced that no one was hungry. About 30 million people had in fact starved to death.

Viewed from Hong Kong, there is something fishy in the furor now ruffling feathers in London publishing, as writs begin to fly. HarperCollins has lost one of its most respected editors, Stuart Proffitt, and Mr Patten is taking his book elsewhere.

Is it really possible that Murdoch, a man whose cunning would awe Machiavelli, did not realise that

Mr Patten takes a rather dim view of the world's last major Communist Party and all it stands for? So why has his publishing firm taken fright at the contents of East And West: The Last Governor Of Hong Kong, a book it asked Mr Patten to write and for which it stumped up a reported £150,000 advance? Publicly to take issue with the "criminal of a thousand antiquities"

Murdoch revelled in his image as a friend of China in a love-in last year

would certainly today be a good way to boost Mr Murdoch's already considerable standing in the halls of Zhongnanhai, China's Kremlin next to the Forbidden City.

According to News Corporation, millions when attended a love-in with Chinese officials last year. Mr Murdoch revelled in his image as a friend of China and the ire his cynicism

arouses among people who don't read his papers. He is not, of course, a fellow traveller. Mr Murdoch is no more an Edgar Snow than Mr Patten. He is a businessman.

Three years ago, Murdoch landed himself in Beijing's dog house with a robust speech warning that satellite television would help undermine "totalitarian regimes everywhere". China responded by issuing State Council Directive No 129: it banned the reception of unauthorised foreign broadcasts and put tight limits on satellite dishes.

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This stripped away the pretence of news gathering and exposed the trip for

what it was: a business mission. The interview never ran.

Mr Patten is, of course, unwilling to play anchorman. What particularly riles the last governor is the angstroms perhaps planted by Murdoch supporters, that his book is boring. For a man whose engagingly caustic turn of phrase is sorely missed in Hong Kong, whispering that he cannot string an interesting sentence together is hurtful and unfair.

Nevertheless, even admirers of his style must wonder what the last governor can say that has not already been said over 450 pages in Jonathan Dimbleby's post-handover tribute.

An analysis of the latest Asian economic meltdown, though interesting in aficionados, is unlikely to set cash registers ringing at WH Smith's.

Mr Patten is understandably irate at being branded a bore. When tempers calm, though, he may quietly thank the Murdoch machine and its meddling. Published elsewhere, his hook, with luck, should now be read.

Guardian

The beacon strike back

to the Editor

Green

O

National

all to the

John

John

The Rt Rev William Wheeler

God's witty apostle

THE Rt Rev William Wheeler, former Bishop of Leeds, who has died at the age of 87, was perhaps the finest intellect among the Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales, and would have been appointed Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, in succession to Cardinal Heenan, had it not been for his frail health.

Like many converts from the Church of England, Wheeler was theologically conservative, but his views were moderated by both pragmatism and a ready sense of humour. For example, the publication of Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*, shortly after his appointment to Leeds in 1966, did not cause a crisis in his diocese, as it did in many others.

This was largely because Wheeler had earned a reputation as a listening bishop, by making himself accessible to anyone who needed advice, and by tempering his uncompromising devotion to the Church's teaching with a gentle understanding in its application to individual cases. In a well-remembered *Ad Clerum*, he wrote to his clergy, reminding them that, having heard confessions daily in Westminster Cathedral for more than a decade, he understood the difficulties of others.

He was fond of the old Latin mass and would sometimes say it. After one such occasion, a lady from the congregation said: "If the mass had been as old-fashioned as that four years ago, I wouldn't have become a Catholic!" He replied: "If the mass hadn't been as old-fashioned as that 40 years ago, I wouldn't have become a Catholic!" Yet, after the Second Vatican Council, Wheeler chaired the Liturgical Commission for England and Wales, responsible for introducing the English mass.

Born in Saddleworth, and educated at Manchester Grammar School, Wheeler went to Oxford to read for the Anglican ministry. After his ordination, he was curate in Brighton and, later, Chesham, before becoming assistant chaplain to Lancing College, Sussex, in 1935. Later that year, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church at Downside Abbey. The following year, he went to Rome to study for the priesthood; he was ordained in 1940.

After four years as assistant priest at St Edmund's Church, Lower Edmonton, east London, during the Blitz he became chaplain and, subsequently, administrator at



Wheeler... on holiday in Whitby, he would go to the harbour to haggle with the fishermen over the price of their catch

Westminster Cathedral. During 11 years in the post, he raised money for the dazzling mosaics on the ceiling of the Lady Chapel and the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. He was appointed an honorary privy chamberlain to the Pope in 1962, a domestic prelate to the Pope in 1965 and chaplain to the Knights of Malta (whom he affectionately dubbed Les Nuts) in 1966. In 1964, Archbishop Cardinal, then the Vatican's representative in England and Wales, consecrated Wheeler co-adjutor Bishop of Middlesbrough. Two years later, he transferred to Leeds as bishop.

Wheeler's sermons were renowned not only for their cheerful adherence to the

teachings of the Church but also for their power. But he will be especially remembered for his after-dinner speeches. During one, to the Convent of All Souls, of which he was a strong supporter, he said: "And Jesus said unto the liberal theologians, Whom do ye say that I am? And they answered and said, Thou art the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the hymn of which we derive the ultimate meaning in our interpersonal relationships. And Jesus said, What?"

Wheeler was also notorious for the affectionate, but pointed, barbs which he was prone to direct towards the more progressive of his epis-

copal brethren in private conversation. When the Pope was due to visit Britain and proposed to emphasise each of the seven sacraments in a different diocese, Wheeler suggested that one particular diocese on the other side of the Pennines might perhaps choose confession as its theme, as then, perhaps, its archbishop might take the opportunity to avail himself of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Wheeler retired in 1985 and, five years later, published his memoirs, *In Truth and Love*. He was perhaps the last of the prince-bishops of the old school, but there was a merry humility beneath the *cappa magna*. On the drawing-room

table at Etkofts, his country house near Wetherby, he kept a stack of well-thumbed dictionaries and reference books to help him and his secretaries complete the Times crossword every day.

On his annual holiday in Whitby, on the Yorkshire coast, he would dress in a blue shirt and grey flannels and go down to the harbour to haggle with the fishermen, returning triumphantly with a grin on his face, the fish in one hand and the sardine he had saved in the other.

Christopher Monckton

The Rt Rev William Gordon Wheeler, born May 5, 1910; died February 20, 1998

Charles Dowsett

Decoding the mysteries of old Armenia

CHARLES Dowsett, who has died aged 74, held the first Calouste Gulbenkian chair in Armenian Studies at Oxford. He will also be remembered for his translation and commentary of *The History of the Caucasian Albanians by Moses Dasarijan* (1961), based on his doctorate, and his expensive *Soviet-Novae* (1997), to whose verses in Armenian, Georgian and Azeri he devoted many years of careful study.

Dowsett also translated tales from Armenian, Russian and Flemish, some under the pseudonym, Charles Downing. He was educated at Owens School, Manchester, and spent the year 1942-43 at St Catherine's Society (now college), Oxford. In 1947, he went to Peterhouse, Cambridge, studying Russian, German and comparative philology. His talent as a linguist led to him being offered a Treasury Studentship by the government. Instituted in the late 1940s, to fill the gap in the country's academic coverage of certain oriental languages, it had been unconsciously revealed during the second world war, these awards gave chosen language graduates the chance to acquire a designated, more demanding language and then devote themselves to teaching it at university level. A post was assured and the students were paid a lecturer's salary for the five or six years of study.

Armenian became Dowsett's speciality. He studied in Paris, as a sojourner in Soviet Armenia at the time was impossible, and added diplomas in modern Armenian and old Georgian to his other scholarly achievements.

In 1964, Dowsett took up his post as lecturer in Armenian at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). He became reader in 1965, but left when he was offered the Calouste Gulbenkian post at Oxford, where, as a fellow of Pembroke College, he remained until 1991, becoming emeritus thereafter. He was elected a fellow of the British Academy in 1977. Sadly, his departure from SOAS left the college unable to offer tuition in Armenian, a situation that has continued to the present day.

I first met Charles Dowsett in 1973, when he became unofficial supervisor of Armenian for my doctorate. He wrote to me that since he was an "epistolary novelist", he preferred face-to-face meetings. When I eventually concentrated on Akhiz and Georgian, he showed no dismay at leaving me to Armenian's northern neighbours and gave me unstinting support in my Caucasian studies.

He was only too keen to

share his fascination with languages. In addition to teaching his official students, for a number of years he ran an extraordinary class in his office at Oxford's Oriental Institute in Pusey Lane. He would corral anyone he could with an interest primarily in old Armenian and old Georgian and devote about 40 minutes to each language, poring over the morpho-syntactic points in some passage from, say, the New Testament.

Perhaps a couple of sentences at most would be commented during the sessions, with numerous references to the solutions to the grammatical puzzles thrown up.

A natural denizen of high table in college, he enjoyed good food, fine wine, stimulating conversation (in a number of languages) and was himself an excellent raconteur. With his few students, Charles was able to indulge his love of literature and, in the latter, he was by no means without talent himself. He made me a gift of a photograph of his *Cambridge Caucasologists on a Visit to Oxford*, which shows, against a background print of Pembroke College, his caricatures of myself and Sir Harold Bailey kit-

ted out in Caucasian dress, accompanied by the Turkish counterpart to Mr Punch.

In 1948, Charles married Friedel Lapuner. Her unexpected death in 1964 left him permanently afflicted with a mysterious immobility in one leg, which doctors could only ascribe to a psychosomatic condition caused by his personal loss. Though he left home less often after this, he continued to travel abroad, dividing his last years between Germany and Oxford, accompanied by his final companion, Anli Köpper, an old family friend from Germany, whose husband had died about the same time as Friedel.

He had no children.



Dowsett... love of language

George Hewitt

Charles Dowsett, language scholar, born January 2, 1924; died January 8, 1998

Desmond Albrow

Just stick to the facts

UP IN the giddy attic known as the composing room of the old Manchester Guardian in Cross Street, Manchester, Desmond Albrow was poring over the "stone" in the early hours. He was the only sub-editor in the building. This was hot-metal journalism in its mid-1950s heyday. Amid the hum and rattle of typesetting machines, the printers took Albrow's last orders for cuts, re-settings and new headlines.

At his side, suddenly, appeared the late-duty reporter, back from a spectacular midnight raid across the city at Ancoats. Albrow glanced at the clock. "You've got 20 minutes," he said. The fire duly hit the front page. The reporter noticed that, for all the haste, not a line of copy had been cut.



Albrow... not to be rushed

meant changing floors at Peterborough Court, but journalistically it was an event — and Albrow loved being part of it. What gave him special pleasure was working side-by-side on Saturdays with Hartwell, especially when something risky came up, and Albrow saw red lights, and Hartwell would murmur: "Let's run it, even so." Such occasions were perhaps the closest Albrow ever came to admitting to a touch of hero worship.

An elegant writer himself, he had the gift of knowing how to cut other people's copy almost without their noticing. It was a truly touchy author who could spot the joins and Albrow's eye for jargon, cliché or verbiage was unforgiving.

THE son of a Bradford cloth-weaver, Albrow was educated at St Bede's grammar school and at Keble College, in wartime Oxford, where he read English. He then served in the Royal Navy on HMS Belfast, from which he viewed the devastated Hiroshima.

From 1966 to 1971, the staunchly Catholic Albrow edited the Catholic Herald — "eccumenical" was a typical Albrowism, arising from his attempts to resolve ecclesiastical squabbling. He returned to the Sunday Telegraph as assistant editor (features), remaining there until his retirement in 1987. He is survived by his wife, Aileen, three daughters and a son.

Eric Shorter

Philip Turner, editor Desmond Albrow was an unfailing source of reassurance to his regular writers, but also had a trick of unpeeling holes in once in a while and encouraging us to have a go at something completely different. Though I was the television critic of the Sunday Telegraph, I found myself at various times marking the anniversary of the battle of Alamein, touring the restive Baltic states of the Soviet Union or expounding at length on Oxford's traffic problems.

Albrow's loyalty to us was put to a stern test when, during the brief editorship of Sir Peregrine Worsthorne, a new arts and books supremo set out systematically to replace every critic on the paper. Desmond was furious, but powerless to intervene. I am sure that this wholesale cut of so many favourite writers contributed to his decision to retire later that same year.

Excessive enthusiasm was never to his taste (save perhaps for cricket and certain writers); and when for instance he was invited in the 1990s to join the Garrick Club his assent to the notion was cautious. "You do know, don't you, that I was once blackballed," he said.

He remained a good friend and is the author, I believe, of my obituary held on file at the Telegraph. I wonder what it says.

Desmond Albrow, journalist, born January 22, 1925; died January 15, 1998

Sidney Cole

A lively dormouse

SIDNEY Cole, who has died aged 81, spent almost 70 years in the film and television industries. Born in south London, he was educated nearby at Westminster City School and at the London School of Economics.

Keen to get into films, he first off letters to companies and individuals, which brought him no jobs, but gained him a lasting friendship with two men who were to play an important part in his life — and that of the British film industry. One was Anthony Asquith, the film director, the other was Thorold Dickinson, a brilliant film editor and director, who became Britain's first professor of film.

Sid's first job was for £1 a week at the Stoll Studios, sitting through potential film scripts, and learning a range of jobs. In 1934, Thorold sent him to Ealing Studios to edit *Midshipman Easy*. Carol Reed's directorial debut. Then, during the Spanish Civil War, the two men worked together, with the help of several like-minded colleagues, to make two films, sharing the direction: *Behind the Spanish Lines* and the famous *Spanish ABE*.

Sid then settled down to make what were essentially propaganda films, working, for instance, with Leslie Howard on *Pimpernel Smith* and *The First of the Few*. He then signed up for an 11-year contract with Michael Balcon at Ealing Studios.

Sid started his Ealing career as supervising editor, sometimes cutting the films himself. Very soon, he became an associate producer. All Ealing producers were "associate producers" so that all Ealing films were "produced" by Balcon himself. All Balcon's associate producers worked together and shared their problems and

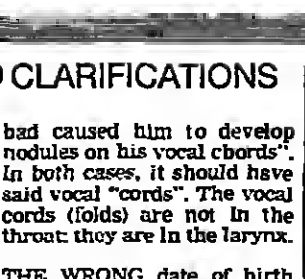
ideas. Sid sometimes wondered whether it was all a bit too cosy and inward-looking. Balcon did not always see eye-to-eye with this wild bunch: John Grierson, for example, thought him "too suburban" but perhaps this was part of his success.

Sid first edited, and later produced, many of the famous Ealing films, including *Sandy Mackendrick's The Man in the White Suit* (1951). And it was Sid, who with Charles Friend directing, produced *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) and persuaded Vaughan Williams to compose the music.

It was Thorold who, early on, had introduced Sid to the Association of Cine Technicians (ACT), which Thorold and Anthony Asquith had changed into a real union. Sid, a left-winger, played an important part in this process, starting his (unpaid) trade-union career by helping to organise the laboratory technicians for the first time. He soon became a member of the general council and executive committee of the ACT and a vice-president. His chief endeavour had always been to improve conditions for ordinary union members. Sometimes called "the Dormouse" for his habit of falling asleep during meetings, he was elected union president in April 1973.

He then taught for a while at the London Film School. He supervised the editing department, teaching and advising students who were editing their own films. He had an office in the editing department surrounded by cutting rooms, where he showed great patience with students, who gave him a new insight into how young people ticked. They also gave him a new lease of life. It helped him, making *Black Beauty*, a children's series based on the classic novel.

Sid was fond of the countryside and a great, indeed semi-professional, cricketer. Sid — this modest polymath — was very English. In 1975 ACTT, now the BECTU, made Sid an honorary member. In the 1950s, he became a prominent member of the BECTU History Project and continued to attend until he became too frail to make the journey.



Cole... great patience

Robert Dunbar

Sidney Cole, film editor, born October 31, 1908; died January 25, 1998

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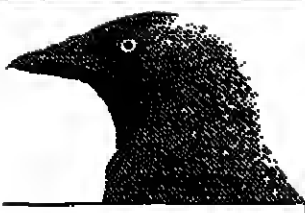
Sid was fond of the countryside and a great, indeed semi-professional, cricketer. Sid — this modest polymath — was very English. In 1975 ACTT, now the BECTU, made Sid an honorary member. In the 1950s, he became a prominent member of the BECTU History Project and continued to attend until he became too frail to make the journey.

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Jackdaw



Just Jane

CLAIRE Tomalin tells each well-known incident of the life, and instantly follows up with Austen's response. Or, rather, with what we might feel in such circumstances, a response couched in the language and shaped by the attitudes of today.

After her mother breast-fed her for three months, how did the newest Austen take to being parted from that breast, to being spoon-fed by a foster mother in the village? At two, did she scream at being taken away from her foster mother and village family? How did she react to being packed off to two fairly unsatisfactory

boarding schools, at seven and nine? Or to the news, abruptly delivered to her at the age of 25, that her father was retiring from his country parish and moving, with his wife and two daughters, to the fashionable resort of Bath?

Jane Austen: A Life, by Claire Tomalin, in *London Review of Books*.

China card

CELEBRATING football and baseball players in the US, or soccer and cricket stars in the UK, cigarette cards had a history. Part of it — some beautiful, antique, Chinese cigarette cards — can be found on the Web. This reminds us that China embraced a wide spread method of killing its people even before its political leaders adopted more efficient techniques.

Web collecting in Creative Review.

Moon magic

PINK Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, aged 26 on March 24, is one of the great monuments of rock history — as over-

whelming aesthetically as it is statistically. That is, it's pretty dazzling. The album has sold around 25 million copies worldwide, already the biggest album by a British band ever, but is still shifting a million more every year — and that despite never reaching Number One in the UK... The question, why the dark side of the moon, is honestly unanswerable except by generalities. The key appears to be the acute balance of opposites. It's full of electronics, technology, sound effects, synthesizers, space and intellectuality, but it's also full of soul, big emotions, voices singing — and speaking — from the heart, and guitars and saxophones doing the same.

The true story of Dark Side of the Moon, in *MOJO*.

Jackdaw wants jewels. E-mail jackdaw@guardian.co.uk; fax 0171-713 4366; write Jackdaw, The Guardian, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R 3ER.

Hannah Pool

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

IN AN article on Page 17, February 4, headed "Peter Davis: it certainly seems to be you, we said that Mr Davis had been 'financial controller of Harris Queensway, the carpet company that collapsed through lack of financial control'", Mr Davis has asked us to say that he was never the financial controller. There was a separate finance director. Mr Davis was deputy chairman until December 1987, when he left. The company was taken over in 1988 and went into receivership about two years later. We accept that this should have been made clearer. We did not intend to suggest that Mr Davis was responsible for the eventual collapse of the company and we apologise if this appeared to be implied in the article.

A REPORT on Page 4, February 24, with the sub-heading "Tom's full volume vocal chords puzzle doctors and dismay family, referred in the text to a 'complaint which

had caused him to develop nodules on his vocal cords'. In both cases, it should have said vocal "cords". The vocal cords (folds) are not in the throat: they are in the larynx.

THE WRONG date of birth was given with the obituary for Sir David Crouch, Page 16, February 24. He was born on June 23, 1919. His age, 78, was correct in the text.

ON PAGE 2, February 23, we trailed the Health pages for the following day with the promise that they would include a feature on tinnitus. They didn't, but the Health pages next Tuesday, March 3, will. Apologies to those who searched in vain.

It is the policy of the Guardian to correct errors as soon as possible. Readers may contact the office of the Readers' Editor, Ian Myles, by telephoning 0171 239 5559 between 11am and 5pm, Monday to Friday. Fax: 0171 239 5997. E-mail: readers@guardian.co.uk

A Country Diary

GLFORD RIVER in mid-February, the camellias were in full flower and the magnolias on the verge of opening their giant buds. The gardens of the National Trust estate at Bosloe were a delight, even though the daffodils, normally the signature flower of the Cornish spring, were rather behind. We had a cottage on the estate for the week and had mild and bright weather, conducive to exploration of long stretches of coastal path. On Tuesday, we set off for Falmouth, five miles by road, more like eight by the coastal path. Sunlit conditions at breakfast-time slowly deteriorated as the sea mist rolled in. As we followed the path, we were looking eastwards across Falmouth Bay to St Anthony's Head and the lighthouse at Zep Point, on the tip of the Roseland, and, by the time we reached the edge of Falmouth, the mournful drone of the foghorn was resonating across the waters of Carrick Roads. Suddenly, the mist rolled away and St Mawes was

revealed in sunshine across blue, sparkling water. On the south bank, across the waters of the Helford River, lie Frenchman's Creek and the other tidal inlets of this sunken coast, which are lodged in so many memories through Daphne du Maurier's novels. A buzzard wheeled above us as we walked across rabbit-trimmed grass to Helford Passage, from where, in summer, a foot-ferret operates to the south bank. We ended the visit with an excursion to Gweek, at the head of the river. Here lies a popular tourist attraction — the seal sanctuary. I looked at this with mixed feelings that 2008 all ways amuse in me. Without doubt, a refuge for battered and hungry seal pups is a worthwhile facility, and injured seals are collected from a wide area. But that is a feed, and return to the sea. A visitor attraction requires a retained seal population, and 2008 never fail to trouble me.

COLIN LUCKHURST

Jeffrey Green writes: The obituary of Colin Franklin (January 23) mentioned "Dr Brown, another black doctor", whose Hackney surgery Dr Franklin had joined in the 1940s. Jamaica-born Dr J. E. Brown, like Franklin, was a widely respected doctor, who lived in London from 1905, working at the London Hospital and at the practice which Franklin joined. Brown's home was a centre for black students, and he ran the Africa cricket club from 1920. As with Franklin, the Caribbean's loss was certainly London's gain.

In Memoriam

COLLINS-DANIEL, Sam, remembered on his ninth birthday by his parents and sister India, still loved. Still missed.

Death Notices

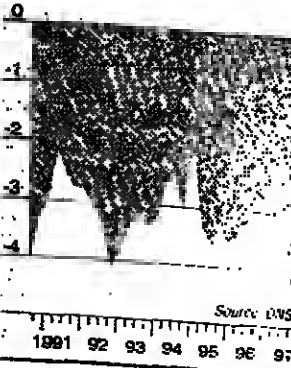
HEADLAND, Leonard, lover of Anthony and Jane, grandfather to John, passed away after a short illness on 26th February 1998, at 10.45am. Friday 27th March 1998. Family flowers only. Donations to the S.P.C.K. 40a Road, London SW17 5BB. US P.C.C. 40a Road, London SW17 5BB. Tel: 0171 713 4129 between 9am and 3pm Mon-Fri.

Trade gap breaks eight-year record

Asian crisis drags UK down

UK trade deficit

Quarterly balance, trade in goods, £bn



Charlotte Denny

INDUSTRY leaders warn yesterday that exporters are set for a bumpy ride this year as the Asian crisis hinders the British economy. The warning came as the quarterly trade gap widened to an eight-year record in the final three months of 1997.

The £12.2 billion shortfall on trade in goods — the highest since the second quarter of 1990 — reinforced City fears about exporters' difficulties. Industry has been struggling with the high value of sterling as cheap imports

compete with British goods and companies find it harder to sell overseas. The Confederation of British Industry said yesterday that it did not expect the pound's value to start falling until the second half of the year.

"Manufacturers are clearly taking a beating from the strong pound," said Dharmendra Kumar, CBI's director of international trade. "The services sector helped rescue the overall trade balance in December, according to the Office for National Statistics. The deficit including services narrowed to £500,000 in November."

The ONS said that one-off items accounted for much of

last month's improvement and that the trend in the deficit was widening.

Unveiling its quarterly economic forecast, the CBI said worse was to come for exporters. The CBI has shaved 0.3 of a percentage point off its predictions for growth this year, due to weak exports.

Forecasting growth of 2.2 per cent this year and 1.7 per cent in 1998, the CBI said the downturn would help the Government meet its inflation target. "Our forecast, while pointing to a slowdown, gives a reasonably attractive outlook for the whole economy," said Kate Barker, the CBI's chief economist.

The CBI predicted that the monetary policy committee of the Bank of England would not have to increase interest rates again.

Firms are expecting fewer orders from South-east Asia, according to the CBI's monthly snapshot. The region accounts for about 7 per cent of British export trade.

"Exports are still being hit by the strength of sterling," said Sudhir Junankar, the CBI's associate director of economic analysis. "Concerns about the East Asian crisis now appear to be having a dampening effect."

The overall picture for manufacturing is not entirely

bleak, according to the CBI, as domestic demand offsets the weakness in exports, with firms expecting moderate growth in output.

Yesterday's figures from the ONS showed visible trade to be a touch less than City forecasters had expected. ONS statisticians said the sale to the Gulf state of Qatar of four patrol boats at £50 million each had helped slim the deficit to £1.3 billion in December, from £1.6 billion the previous month.

Initial estimates from the ONS put the deficit on trade and services over the whole of 1997 at £2.5 billion compared with £2.7 billion in 1996.

Roger Cove

CATALOGUE retailer Argos yesterday began its defence against the £1.6 billion takeover bid by mail order company Great Universal Stores by announcing a drop in profits and the exit of its finance director with a £100,000 pay-off.

The company said last night that Bob Stewart asked to take early retirement and was being compensated for breaking his two-year contract. He would leave during the second half of this year.

Mr Stewart's salary is to be increased from £200,000 a year to £260,000 from April 1 so that he will receive the £100,000 a year pension to which he would have been entitled.

The departure follows that of chief executive Mike Smith, who stepped down because of serious illness. He was replaced two weeks ago by a former Marks & Spencer and Burton executive, Stuart Rose.

Mr Rose said after the launch of the defence yesterday that there was no commercial logic in merging Argos with a mail order business. He insisted that the company had a bright, independent future and would

return to growth after correcting a number of mistakes. "We have got to sharpen our pencils and get cracking," he said. "Our problems are not insurmountable."

Argos had not focused sufficiently on its customers, which had resulted in poor service and product availability, an inadequate product range and a lack of attention to marketing.

Argos said some of these problems, combined with a weak market in key categories such as toys and jewellery, led to disappointing Christmas trading for the second year running.

Pre-tax profits last year fell to £128 million from £141 million in 1996. But before a number of special costs, including investment in the Netherlands, profits were marginally ahead. Sales grew nine per cent to £1.8 billion.

The company said this year had started well, but refused to divulge details. The chairman, Sir Richard Lloyd, refused to say if the board was looking for a "white knight" buyer to save it from GUS, or would launch a share buy-back or special dividend.

GUS said the defence document contained "old news". "Argos's defence merely confirms our view that Argos is a mature format that has run out of steam," GUS said.

Colliers dig deep in Wales

DALE Hart (left), chief executive of Celtic Energy, and Tyrone O'Sullivan (right), chairman of Tower Colliery, yesterday revealed plans for the first new deep-mined pit in South Wales for 20 years.

The £20 million joint venture between Celtic, the open-cast coal producer, and Tower, the firm formed by miners who bought out their pit in 1995, could create up to 300 jobs.

The new mine, if given planning permission by the Coal Authority, will be at Margam, near Port Talbot, where Celtic already operates an open-cast site. The joint owners said it should last a minimum of 20 years, producing 400,000 tonnes annually, much of it for the nearby British Steel plant, with overall estimated reserves of 27 million tonnes.

Peter Hain, Welsh industry minister, welcomed the planned pit as evidence that companies were optimistic about the future of coal in South Wales.

PHOTOGRAPH: JEFF MORGAN



Imro chides Morgan enforcer

Dan Atkinson

IMRO, the fund management supervisor, has reprimanded a former compliance officer for failings connected to the £430 million investment scandal at Morgan Grenfell Asset Management.

Bruce Hacking, who has since retired, was ordered to pay Imro's costs of more than £24,000.

The action comes on top of the record fine of £2 million Imro levied against Morgan Grenfell in April last year for its own failings in the affair. Police investigations into the activities of sacked fund man-

ager Peter Young are continuing.

Dealings in three UK-based funds holding investments worth £1.4 billion were suspended in autumn 1996 after it was discovered that Mr Young had been inflating the value of funds under his control by pumping money into unlisted securities whose worth was difficult to check.

Deutsche Bank, Morgan Grenfell's owner, said the affair could cost as much as £430 million, including compensation of £200 million.

Mr Hacking was not responsible for day-to-day supervision of the funds at the centre of the scandal, but Imro said he bears some responsibility for failures at the critical time.

From April 1996, he was aware that a large number of assets had been allocated to unlisted securities, and that "the risk profile of the European Growth (fund) had become inappropriate for a fund of that nature".

From July 1996 he was aware that certain documentation was inadequate or misleading, and from August 1996 he was aware that "there was an unusually high level of unlisted securities" in key funds and that documentation was still not of the required standard.

By failing to inform Imro of these difficulties, and by fail-

ing to tell senior management that Imro should be informed, he had caused Morgan Grenfell to breach Imro rules.

In addition, Mr Hacking was found to have signed off a routine annual statement of affairs within part of Morgan Grenfell to Imro in August 1996 without mentioning the difficulties of which he was aware.

Compliance officers are the in-house enforcement staff responsible for keeping firms in conformity with City regulations. Mr Hacking was not in charge of the whole Morgan Grenfell compliance department, a fact which Imro took into account when reaching its findings against him.

The euro should be child's play, say psychologists

Martin Walker in Brussels

EUROPE'S schoolchildren should be targeted for a propaganda campaign as "strong vectors of information on the euro" to help sell the new single currency to a sceptical public, says a team of psychologists and cultural experts recruited by the European Commission to promote economic and monetary union.

Britain's Department of Education, along with similar ministries across Europe, has been advised to start preparing text books, maths lessons and teaching aides on the euro for the start of the new school year in September, and thus children to help educate the parents.

The report of the group on "psycho-sociological aspects of the changeover to the euro", one of a series of expert teams hired by the Commission, was unveiled yesterday as the Commission opened its first public consultation forum on the euro.

The report recommends recruiting teachers, doctors, chemists and postmen, as well as television personalities and opinion leaders, even if they are sceptical of the single currency, to help sell the euro.

"The fact of involving them in a process which most

regard as a very great certainty may have a positive influence on their opinion," the report says.

Claiming that "it is necessary to combat the negative images generated by European unification", the psycho-sociological experts recommend the single currency should be marketed around ideas of peace, the cohesion of inter-European relations, democracy and a collective project reactivated to create a community which does not replace existing national communities but stands alongside them.

The problem, the experts say, is that the euro is being launched as a financial project, being used in bank transactions from next year, but not becoming a publicly used currency until 2002. This carries the negative aspect that it will be seen as "the currency of the rich".

The groups warn: "Nothing would be more hazardous than to rely solely on the confidence of financial markets. It is becoming impossible to deal with the introduction of the euro on a purely practical and consensual basis, ignoring the political and cultural dimensions of the transition."

It says special campaigns should be devised for the elderly, the semi-literate, the poor and those without bank accounts.

Health group seeks savings

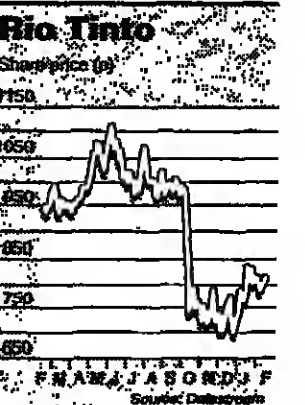
THE strong pound shaved £21 million off profits last year at health and hospital supplies group Smith & Nephew, whose brands include Elastoplast, Simple Soap and Li-Lets. The same could happen this year, chief executive Chris O'Donnell warned yesterday. The company would be relying on cost savings in 1998.

Profits were down 12 per cent at £161 million before exceptional costs. About 80 per cent of sales are abroad. — Julia Finch

Meltdown threatens miner

BOOMING 1997 profits for resources giant Rio Tinto were overshadowed yesterday by fears that the Asian economic meltdown will mean a 15 per cent-plus earnings slide this year. The group said it would not be shelving any projects as a result of the recent commodity-price slump, but warned of "tougher criteria" for any new schemes.

Chairman Robert Wilson said: "It is still too early to assess the long-term effects for our industry of the economic difficulties in Asia." He said metals prices had already fallen, partly as a result of speculation, but he did not expect a decline in metals consumption. With a quarter of sales revenues coming from copper, Rio Tinto is vulnerable to any downturn in the red metal; one analyst suggested the price of copper was set to drop from \$1.03 per lb to \$0.91, which could cause an overall drop in Rio Tinto's net earnings from £1.22 billion in 1997 to £1.02 billion in 1998. — Dan Atkinson



KPMG plans £122m spree

FOLLOWING the collapse of merger plans with Ernst & Young, accountancy firm KPMG intends to raise up to £122 million of loans for expansion. Colin Sherman, KPMG's chairman, said the money would be used mainly for new offices in developing markets and for investment in technology. Launching the firm's annual report yesterday, he said KPMG would also have to change its structure to become a global firm rather than a federation of national operations.

Mr Sherman said work on the aborted merger had not prevented continued growth in the UK. In the past three months the income rose by 18 per cent, with a particularly strong performance from management consulting. — Roger Cove

Lasmo backs Iran lobby

OIL exploration company Lasmo is backing moves by European governments to prevent Americans taking punitive action against western companies which invest in Iran. Joe Darby, Lasmo chief executive, said when announcing 1997 results that the company would look carefully at field development deals due to be announced by the Iranian government in March.

Lasmo reports £48 million profit on cash flow up 9 per cent at £205 million, but is pulling out of Colombia and Gabon, and examining the likely profitability of Italian operations. — Celia Weston

Asia toll increases

HOLLAND'S ABN AMRO and Paribas of France yesterday joined the ranks of international banks hit by Asia's economic problems. ABN reported that it was making a precautionary extra provision of about 500 million guilders (£150 million) against its operations in Asia while Paribas said it was setting aside Fr1.9 billion (£190 million) against its exposure against potential Asian risks.

ABN reported full-year net profits of 3,853 million guilders, up 16.7 per cent on 1996. Paribas said net income (excluding minority interests) rose 51 per cent to Fr6.6 billion. — Mark Miller

TOURIST RATES — BANK SELLS				
Australia 2.42	Germany 2.850	Malaysia 6.26	Singapore 2.84	
Austria 20.30	Greece 458.67	Malta 0.68	South Africa 7.93	
Belgium 56.46	Hong Kong 12.43	Netherlands 3.2400	Spain 243.28	
Canada 2.22	India 64.82	New Zealand 2.79	Switzerland 12.92	
Cyprus 0.5485	Ireland 1.556	Norway 1.596	Sweden 1.23	
Denmark 11.06	Israel 5.91	Portugal 295.36	Turkey 361.870	
Finland 8.84	Italy 2.069	Saudi Arabia 6.06	USA 1.6148	
France 9.829				

Underside

Dan Atkinson

AN EMBARRASSING case involving solicitors and a stonk of legal aid money may be heading for the Office for the Supervision of Solicitors. In a nutshell, the allegation is that our learned friends bought themselves a client for a couple of thou, knowing that he came with a handsome legal aid award, but someone close to the deal has spoiled the lot to the OSS. Shoppers, eh?

MEANWHILE, clock World, the modestly named glossy inter-

national festivity produced by Glaxo Wellcome. World's latest issue, doing the rounds yesterday, features an interview with chief executive Bob Ingram. His message: "The coming year will be one for delivering our promise." Except to SmithKline Beecham, that is.

CHANGING times (1): When the Bank of England received its first charter — now kept reverentially in the Bank's museum — in 1694, the governor and directors made a day of it, what with the swearing of allegiance to the King and fidelity to the Bank.

In the next few months the Bank will get a new charter, but with rather less ceremony. The best the Bank can hope for is a be-

ribboned typescript and, according to governor Eddie George, the Treasury is threatening to send the charter by e-mail. Let's hope the Bank is logged on at the right time.

ON THE merger-mania front, Commercial Union and General Accident were keeping mum yesterday as to who proposed the £15 billion marriage. One thing was clear: unlike the Barclays/Standard Chartered snuggle-up, there was no summit meeting at chichi Chez Nico. The canny insurers insisted they couldn't afford the sort of nosh on offer at such places.

Nor is CGU going to throw money at the pony-tail-wearing image-consulting fraternity. Yes, the new name is boring, but Gen-



eral Accident chairman Sir Alick Rankin said it had been decided not to spend half a million quid on a "you-know-what"-type name. Don't mention Diageo.

CHANGING times (2): May Bank, the holiday nominally connected with the proletariat, will bring no respite for the traders at London's derivatives market, the Liffe. While the rest of the country picnics on the edge of motorways, the strip-teasers will be in full cry. Why? It's the EMU, stupid. The previous weekend, EU heads of government will have decided who is in and who ain't in terms of the euro, providing an unmissable opportunity for the blazers to dive-bomb the weak sisters (sorry, "to trade in the global market place"). After all, the Continent's exchanges will be open.

Liffe types are going to be busy in future: EU countries have only two bank holidays in common,

Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

RUMOURS surface once more regarding Michael de Guzman, chief geologist at Busang, Borneo, the "biggest gold deposit in history" that turned out last year to be a hole in the ground. Mr de Guzman "committed suicide" on March 19 last year, just before the Bre-X fraud was uncovered, the first person to do so by jumping from a helicopter above a swamp. Now doubts about identifying the corpse have re-emerged: the body was almost unrecognisable, we hear. And the doors of the Alouette-3 chopper would have been hard-to-impossible to open under the circumstances. Could the most original of geologists still be with us?

Financial Editor: Alex Brummer
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Two huge crises at a time are enough, says Bank of England governor

George makes a date with chaos

David Gow

THE Bank of England wants the Government to freeze legislative and regulatory changes that would impose fresh burdens on the computers of City institutions already struggling to cope with the problem of the millennium bug and the introduction of the euro.

The Bank's intervention came to light yesterday as the Government called an emergency European Union conference for later this spring to tackle the problem caused by computers by the year 2000 date-change, amid growing worries in Whitehall and the City that many of Britain's European partners might fail.

ing to grasp the size of the issue.

Tony Blair, stepping up the Government's campaign to make Britain ready for what Eddie George, the Bank's governor, called "a day of judgement on that first day of the year 2000", is to preside at a meeting on March 30 designed to alert up to half a million small businesses thought to be ignoring the problem.

Don Cruickshank, chairman of Action 2000, the government-sponsored campaign, disclosed that he and his team were drawing up contingency plans with public services such as the National Health Service and social security providers to make sure there would be no material disruption on January 1, 2000.

The City and large British firms view public services as particularly vulnerable to the bug — the failure of many computer programmes to recognise the year 2000 or thereafter. They were designed with two digits rather than four to represent the year in a cheap short-cut.

Launching the first of a series of Bank reports, Mr George said most City institutions were well embarked on plans to change their programmes to eliminate the bug, but there could be significant gaps, notably among dependent suppliers.

It is understood that the Bank is seriously concerned that finance houses outside



Eddie George rings in the start of a new five-year gilts contract in London yesterday

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL CHASTREE

the Britain and US, notably in Europe and the Far East, are behind in recognising the scale of the issue and in preparing to deal with it. Senior officials fear significant knock-on effects in the City, where 300 banks have set aside at least £1 billion to tackle the problem.

He disclosed that the Bank was canvassing, including with ministers, the idea of a "change freeze" to make sure

that millennium compliance was not delayed because of the need to divert scarce IT information technology resources to other projects. Skill shortages are so acute, according to the Bank governor and Mr Cruickshank, that pay rates are soaring.

Among changes that could be frozen would be government legislation or regulations that would require changes to reporting systems,

and changes to dealing or settlement procedures. The Bank is canvassing support for an extra bank holiday on December 31, 1999, a Friday, or even January 4, 2000, a Tuesday.

The Christmas and New Year holidays fall on the weekend and an extra day might allow institutions to test their information systems after the crucial date change.

Mr George's intervention came as industry minister Barbara Roche, who chairs the EU telecoms council, unveiled plans for the May conference on co-ordinating campaigns and programmes to tackle the bug on a pan-European basis.

According to Mr Cruickshank, of Britain's 14 EU partners, only Denmark, Holland and Sweden had set up national campaigns to highlight the threat posed by the bug.

He cited an executive at the UK subsidiary of a large German firm as saying: "If it were not for the Brits the Germans would be doing nothing."

Notebook

Reality threatens CBI's optimism



Edited by Alex Brummer

THE latest forecasts from the Confederation of British Industry make comfortable reading for British economic policy makers. The gist is simple. Sit back, give short-term interest rates the odd nudge lower and watch the good times roll.

Growth will moderate comfortably and owe more to stronger exports and investment than to the fickle consumer. Inflation will hit the Government's target, the public finances will head for balance by 1999/2000 and the economy will create enough jobs to keep the dole queues virtually unchanged.

There are at least two snags which threaten the CBI's rosy projections: the strength of the pound and the weakness of many of the Asian economies. Take sterling. Yesterday's figures from the Office of National Statistics showed the trade gap narrowed in December, but, as the ONS noted, the evidence suggests a trend towards a widening deficit.

It is hard to believe that this is entirely unconnected with the present level of the exchange rate. True, the pound may settle back once the European Union's heads of state have decided who will be in and who will be out of the single currency. Then again, it may not.

The financial markets appear convinced that monetary union will happen. Whether they are convinced it will work or, perhaps more accurately, whether they believe the transition will be so smooth there will be no need to hedge the odd bet by continuing to use the pound as a safe haven is another matter.

Then there is Asia. The latest CBI forecasts for economic growth both this year and next have been trimmed back, largely — as far as the current year is concerned — as a result of events in Asia. But it is hard to feel particularly confident over any projections about the full impact of the Asian contagion. Markets in the region may have stabilised, but the crisis is far from over. Firms will continue to go bankrupt, banking systems

will continue to creak. As the Korean central bank noted yesterday, 14 of the country's 26 commercial banks do not meet the capital adequacy standards laid down by the Bank for International Settlements. New credit will remain hard to get, existing loans tough to renegotiate.

The tigers, naturally enough, will try to trade their way out of trouble; consuming less and exporting more to the US and western Europe; using the competitive advantage produced by the slump in the value of their currencies against the dollar. UK exports to Korea halved in December, for example. Trade tensions, to put it no more highly, cannot be ruled out.

Without in any way suggesting the CBI has fallen victim to an attack of irrational exuberance, it is perhaps worth recalling what the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, told Congress about the US economy earlier this week: "With the current situation reflecting a balance of strong countervailing forces, events in the months ahead are not likely to unfold smoothly." Quite.

Profligate Argos

FOR a company which badly needs the backing of disappointed shareholders, Argos has begun its defence against GUS in curious fashion.

Never mind the lack of any convincing explanation for how the flagging catalogue showroom format is to be revived without help from GUS. That is worth saving until later in the battle.

Tucked away in a footnote to the defence document, Argos tells shareholders it has given its finance director hundreds of thousands of pounds because he wanted to retire early.

Losing the finance director is bad enough, especially as it follows the departure of the chief executive through illness. But losing him in a way which is both expensive and out of line with best boardroom practice is worse.

Either the Argos finance director wanted to leave early, in which case compensation cannot be justified. Or Argos wanted him to go, in which case it should say so.

With this kind of behaviour, shareholders might be forgiven for thinking that their money might be in safer hands with the GUS board.

North-east banks 2,000 jobs

Martin Wainwright

BITAIN'S fastest-growing industry announced another huge expansion yesterday with the creation of 2,000 jobs at a new phone-banking centre in Sunderland, Tyne and Wear.

The region's friendly accent was once again credited with buttressing the concentration of call centres in the North-east and Yorkshire, but there were also warnings from bank unions about "over-controlled" conditions risking exploitation of staff.

The new plant was announced by Barclays, the phone-banking arm of Barclays. The move will provide Sunderland's biggest jobs boost since the 1994 opening of Nissan's car-bus plant.

The project dwarfs Barclays' existing centres in Coventry and Manchester, which together employ 850 staff.

Barclays regional director,

Jim Thompson, said: "This is a good news story of which dreams are made, particularly in the North-east — but it isn't a dream."

The banking union Unifi, which is struggling for recognition in Barclays, also welcomed the new jobs, but said it was pressing for more restricted growth of the sector. Sarah Messenger, the union's national officer, said: "We've been pressing for the North-east to be chosen for Barclays' new centre, but the fact

Stop burn-out

The LSE study offers three safeguards for call centre staff:

- Performance-related pay must have a team element.
- Appraisal of performance needs to be fairly vigorous but must be helpful, not an impersonal audit.
- Firms should not skimp on training and coaching.

that the union will not be recognised there is a matter of major concern."

Unions are alarmed at the concentration of power in employers' hands at call centres, which were described in a report from the London School of Economics last week as potential sweatshops of the future.

The study vividly described the "Big Brother" potential of call centre computer monitoring, which audits the length and quality of call-taking and records all time staff spend off the system.

Unifi and the Banking Insurance and Finance Union (Bifu) are also concerned that call centre growth represents a potential threat to conventional bank branches. A spokesman for Bifu said: "Customers make it clear that they want human contact, which you get in a branch, but call centres may well prove cheaper for the banks."

Sunderland city council welcomed the investment, which joins 30 call centres in the North-east, including London Electricity's customer accounts.

Ear-bashed operatives can find they are working in the aural equivalent of Bentham's perfect prison

"I COULDN'T take it any more — it was driving me mad," says Pete after a year of quickfire phone calls, starting and ending with a monotonous, compulsory formula, writes Martin Wainwright.

"Good morning, welcome to Barclayscall, my name is Pete... Is there anything else I can help you with? Thank you for calling. Goodbye."

He began to think he would wake up at night screaming that patter. "I found it all right for most of my time, but at this time of the month, when everyone's just been paid, it was peep, one call, finish that, then peep, another one, all the time."

Pete worked on sales and service advice for eight-

hour shifts, usually with spells of a maximum two hours' phone work. Any "walkaway" — hanging up to stop the calls — was logged and required an explanation. "There was no problem if you needed walkaway to go to the lavatory, say, but they needed to know how long you were off and why."

Calls are also monitored for quality and length. Calls that drag on mean fewer customers served.

Pete has no criticism of Barclayscall's running of the system. "There's a career structure and salary rises on performance." The starting rate of £10,310 rises to £12,129 (with most staff at Pete's call centre on the top rate).

The stress of the job in such regulated circumstances becomes hugely increased at the "cowboy" end of the trade, according to bank unions.

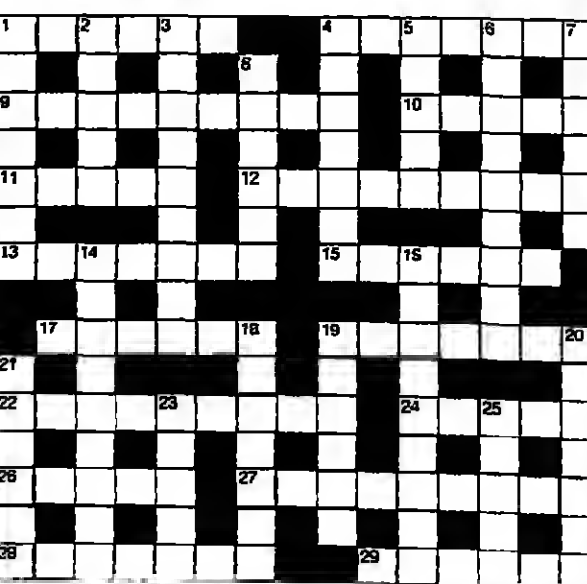
Simon Kennedy, with two years' experience trouble-shooting for the Banking Insurance and Finance Union in Leeds, says: "The worst places are dominated by fear — complain and you're out — and that's where the total control which the computer system allows leads to abuse."

Professor David Metcalf of the London School of Economics, which warned last week of the "Orwellian potential" of such closely monitored work, said LSE studies of 100 call centres showed an eerie parallel with Jeremy Bentham's 18th century "perfect prison", the Panopticon.

"His principle was complete visibility of all prisoners from a central control centre, and that is what we have here."

Guardian Crossword No 21,209

Set by Crispa

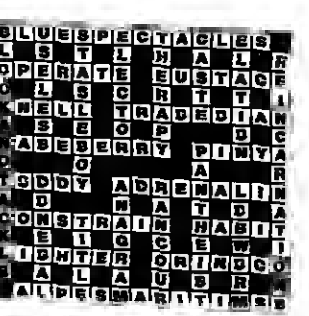


Across

- 1 The rest will have to sit again (8)
- 4 Show left to a conservationist body (7)
- 9 Cleansing bar used by the male (9)
- 10 Fruit in a great heap pleases youngsters (9)
- 11 A fool, and in Paris that's an advantage (5)
- 12 He spared a replacement for men at the front (9)
- 13 Drink with cold woman pedagogues (7)
- 15 Small children taking direction in a Devonshire place (6)
- 17 The guy two top journalists paid attention to (6)
- 19 There's a certain lack of enthusiasm for bedroom-tidying (7)
- 22 A dunderhead came into line when spoken to (9)
- 24 A snake to be seen in summer (5)
- 26 Dispenses with storage accommodation (5)

Down

- 1 Make a fuss about the help turning up bearing (7)
- 2 Heads for the savoury food (5)
- 3 Scored, but decided against competing (9)
- 4 Huff taken about bond being invalid (7)
- 5 A girl whisked the white of an egg (5)
- 6 Expect to pick up (9)
- 7 Die in the attempt to be modest (6)
- 8 Numbers are plainly hesitant when comparatively tight (6)
- 14 People, many people, join in at change being effected (9)
- 16 Befuddled man — target for a scolding woman (9)
- 18 Far from unfriendly (7)

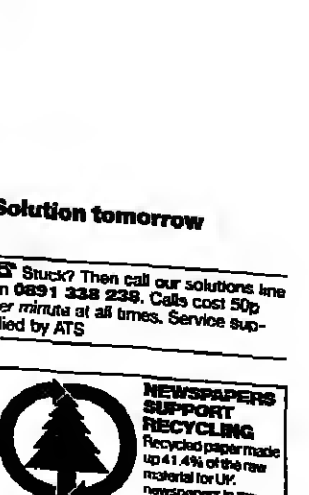


CROSSWORD SOLUTION 21,208

- 19 An area north of London, it appears, provides only basic housing (3-9)
- 20 Remain at odds over river sailer (7)
- 21 Gun with hammer raised out of use (6)
- 23 Result, some find, from having eaten sweet dumplings (6)
- 25 Go with the current tendency (5)

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EasyJet issues writ against BA

Keith Harper

Transport Editor

EASYJET yesterday issued a High Court writ against British Airways to prevent it starting a rival no-frills airline.

With the launch of BA's subsidiary, Go, only weeks away, EasyJet said it wanted "to prevent BA illegally cross-subsidising its low-cost subsidiary."

The legal action follows the refusal of BA, in correspondence with EasyJet's lawyers, to give an undertaking that it will not use the profits from the main airline to subsidise Go. BA is committed to backing Go with £50 million and is

guaranteeing its future for at least three years.

Cross-subsidies by dominant companies are illegal under Article 86 of the European Community treaty. A case against Tetra Pak, the dominant manufacturer of drink cartons, resulted in a \$1 million (£810,000) fine.

Stelios Haji-Ioannou, EasyJet's chairman, said: "The spirit of the law is that BA should not use monopoly money to cross-subsidise the costs of Go, so that they eliminate smaller competitors like us. We believe in fair competition and we asked BA to give an undertaking to play fair, but they refused."

Mr Haji-Ioannou, said that BA "obviously do not like a

level playing field. We have no option but to ask the courts to uphold the law before consumers lose their choice. BA's track record against Freddie Laker and Richard Branson shows they are habitual offenders."

BA said it would fight the move. "We have consistently maintained there is nothing unlawful or anti-competitive about Go's operation," a spokesman said. "We are convinced it will widen and improve the choice available to passengers, and will therefore be vigorously defending these proceedings in the interest of competition."

BA has taken an interest in EasyJet since it was set up more than two years ago. Mr

Haji-Ioannou says that BA's chief executive, Bob Ayling, tried to buy the company last year but Mr Haji-Ioannou was not interested.

BA first announced last year it was entering the no-frills market. No routes or fares have been released, but it will almost certainly compete with EasyJet and another low-frills airline, Ryanair, on domestic and short-haul European routes.

BA is today announcing details of an alliance with the Finnish carrier Finnair Oy. It is also moving towards a deal with the Spanish airline, Iberia, in which it is trying to obtain a 18 per cent stake, to strengthen its routes into Latin America.